

“SHEART, MAN, PASS O’ER THE HISTORY
AND COMMENCE THY FABRICATION!”:
THE TWO *SOT-WEED FACTORS*;
THEIR NATION, ITS HUMOR, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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Recent trends in the disciplines of history and American literature have marked a departure from certainty and a move toward uncertainty about America’s place in the world, something which had been previously affirmed by exceptionalist historical narratives supporting idealized notions of an inherently American identity: something metaphysical, universal, and positive. Historians have grown to suspect the truthfulness of historical narratives, however, and have increasingly acknowledged the existence of multiple histories, many of which have been excluded from the official record. In American literature, there has been a similar upheaval regarding whether a shared American identity (and reality) even exists and can be accurately represented in print. Modern writers of American literature, such as John Barth, have thus moved away from realism toward postmodern experimentation, which includes metafiction among other things.

In this thesis, I examine the connection between our increased historical doubt, American identity and nationalism, and John Barth’s novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), a retelling of the events of the seventeenth-century poet Ebenezer Cooke’s satire of the same

name. Both Barth's and Cooke's works, I argue, criticize the ways in which history can be whitewashed for a variety of reasons, one of which is to serve the creation of national identities which depend upon a *sanitization* of historical accounts for support. Both Barth and Cooke expose the reality of colonial America's vice through their use of humor; therefore, throughout this essay, I use the lens of humor studies to investigate the ways that the aforementioned criticism emerges from a close reading of both the novel and its poetic source material.

Satire, in particular, is an extension of the humor of aggression, one of the oldest humorous modes, and has been deployed as a corrective by everyone from the Greeks and Romans to our Puritan ancestors. In the case of Barth and Cooke, their humor-as-corrective is directed against their protagonists, both of whom come to symbolize the salient issues of their times. Barth's Eben Cooke prizes his virtue above all else, and as someone out of touch with reality, he continually looks to idealized histories to inform his own attempt to write a sanitized account of the colony of Maryland for his patron. The real Cooke's unnamed factor is similarly characterized as a bumbler who is wholly out of place in what he sees as the backwoods world of the colonies, but his continued, humorous failures as a person and as a businessman ultimately showcase the fact that someone with lofty ideals (of self or of country) cannot thrive in the "shitten" world of reality, one quite different from the new Eden depicted in seventeenth-century promotional literature. Unsavory though the truth of the matter (and of history) may be, Barth and Cooke suggest one is better off acknowledging the vice, without necessarily partaking in it or reproducing it, than they are in attempting to deny it or cover it up.

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At this time, I would also like to acknowledge the listening ears, patient hearts, and helpful brains of the other members of my cohort who had to hear me rant and rave about humor studies and myriad logistical issues related to the production of this document for roughly a year. Bless you all.

And as for the many other people who have supported me over the years—from my long-suffering parents (William and Rachel), to my brother (Timothy), my many other beloved relations (Linda, Roy, George, Riky, “Papa,” and the whole crew), and my cat-brothers and cat-sister (Nemo, Gandalf, and Missy)—you are all equally deserving of thanks for your support during the past two years.

Dedication

For mom and dad—from here with love.

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Introduction

Humor and History, America Style

Humor can be dissected, as a frog can,
 but the thing dies in the process
 and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.
 – E. B. White, “Some Remarks on Humor,” *A Subtreasury of American Humor* (1941)

[F]or what is America, ha-ha, but the simple reverse of America, hoo-ray?
 – Philip Roth, “Writing American Fiction” (1961)

Impetus

In his essay “Does American Literature Have a History?”, Michael J. Colacurcio suggests that effectively studying the history of American literature necessitates foregoing popular notions of America as a metaphysical entity (130)—a nationalistic sentiment which suggests the country sprang whole and fully-formed into existence, whereas the actual history is more complicated and less sanitized. Thus, when John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) depicts a “shitten” colonial landscape filled with rapacious men and women, double-crosses, double agents, shady dealings, and fragmented alliances, this work of fiction potentially represents more of the reality than can be found in our official history. In this regard, Barth’s treatment of Lord Baltimore’s province of Maryland echoes that of Ebenezer Cooke in his eighteenth-century poem of the same name: unabashedly satirical, yet also truer to life than the sort of myth-building popular accounts Colacurcio critiques would hold. Barth’s novel, like Cooke’s poem, is undeniably humorous. Patricia Tobin refers to Barth as a “comic novelist” in the introduction to *John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance* (1).

Frank Gado, Gerhard Joseph, Jac Tharpe, Stan Fogel, and Gordon Slethaug also use the term while offering some brief explication of the way in which the comic elements of Barth's work are communicated; however, no one has yet conducted an exhaustive study of the humor of Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, including how it uses that humor and to what ends. Many critics have discussed the humorous qualities of his work in general. Tharpe, in particular, describes this aspect of Barth's writing as "an expansive sense of humor that made him eventually tell stories zestfully and without let or hindrance" using "his marvelous carnal vision" (13). The general consensus is definitely that there is something funny about Barth's writing, but the matter of classifying that humorous *something* is slightly up in the air, as is the question of what purpose it might serve. Therefore, this essay will use John Barth's novel and Cooke's poem to interrogate issues of history and national identity through the lens of humor—specifically, how Barth's novel offers a critique of an affirming, sanitized past, which is often used to support popular nationalist sentiments of the sort that have come to define our concept of an American identity in some ways. I will argue that Cooke's poem has a similar aim and that both the novel and poem communicate this criticism through their satiric (mis)treatment of their protagonists, who ultimately come to symbolize the sort of idealized, sanitized, downright impractical worldview that fuels some of our official histories.

Practically speaking, the purpose of my analysis of Barth's and Cooke's works is not strictly historiographical. Rather, I am more interested in the ways that these texts toy with and subvert our popular conceptions of the past, as well as their authors' purposes in doing so. As such, I am less interested in reinvestigating issues such as the changing scenes of history and fiction writing in America and am content with taking the experts at their word.

Their groundwork, which I will rely on while making my own arguments about Barth's novel and Cooke's poem, will be elucidated here in the introduction and subsequently brought into conversation with my own critical interests. Since Barth's novel features the fictionalized story of Cooke's composition of the Sot-Weed poem set against a backdrop of de-sanitized history, it is worth comparing the two to examine their similarities and differences not only with regard to content, but also because of the ways in which they both examine the American landscape and identity. Barth's (longer) Sot-Weed story is the principal focus, for as David Morrell indicates, it subsumes the original poem: "Not only did Barth insert phrases from Cooke's poetry in his prose, but on occasion he quoted from the poems directly" ("Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus" 38). As with the aforementioned discussion of humor in Barth's work, previous comparisons of the two *Sot-Weed Factors* have been conducted by critics like David Morrell and Elaine B. Safer, while other scholars such as Chris Beyers have specifically addressed the poem's historical accuracy. Safer has also focused on the same question of history but with regard to the novel.

Safer's chapter on Barth in her book *The Contemporary American Comic Epic* comes the closest to touching upon the same ideas as my own research. The difference is that Safer's attention is split between the works of Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Ken Kesey, and her readings for humor in the texts are framed using the conventions of the mock-epic, including their inversion of the qualities of the early American hero as defined by Cotton Mather. Her study of *The Sot-Weed Factor* novel includes a discussion of the differences between the fictionalized account of John Smith's interactions with Pocahontas and those we take as true from historical records. Her reading in the book, as well as a similarly-focused article, "The Allusive Mode and Black Humor in Barth's Sot-Weed

Factor,” is framed using the conventions of the mock-epic. Therefore, while Safer provides a foundation from which to begin my own investigations, I have not been “beaten to the punchline,” so to speak. Critics such as Gerhard Joseph, Jac Tharpe, and Fogel and Slethaug have all also discussed identity in Barth’s *Sot-Weed Factor*; however, their focus is on the personal. The character of Henry Burlingame, in particular, takes on many different guises over the course of the plot, and his constant shifting from one impenetrable, wholly-embodied identity to the next causes the fictional Eben Cooke to question his own and whether anyone else he has interacted with has actually existed. I am still interested in Barth’s overall treatment of identities in the novel, but I see room in the criticism to expand the discussion of the personal into the national (my stated focus), using the lens of the historical and its ties to nationalism as communicated through humor.

Like the winding path trod by the fictional Eben Cooke, the protagonist of John Barth’s novel, the road before us forks and twists back upon itself. As such, the simplest method for addressing the snarl of factors involved—humor (modern and colonial), our evolving sense as Americans of our nation’s history (and its mutability), and the meeting places of these elements in the works of Barth and Cooke—is to take them one at a time, beginning with the most general inroad toward the heart of the issue: their similar use of humor as a means of interrogating “serious” issues of history, identity, and nationalist thought.

The Humor Problem—From Ancient Greece to Colonial America, and Beyond

Before one can answer the question of what makes America’s humor different from that of any other nation, one must first delineate the study of humor in general. Victor Raskin, editor of *The Primer of Humor Research*, and his fellow contributors to the volume

on the study of humor note that aside from the age-old problem of analyzing “jokes” (explaining one renders it unfunny, after all), the biggest issue at work in the field of humor research has to do with its legitimacy as a subject—or, in other words, the fact that there are few academics, critics, and scholars that make a career of it. Instead, humor research often serves as an addendum to other interests, hence the need for a collected volume of introductory essays covering the state of humor research in nearly every discipline (math and science being two, potentially obvious, exceptions). Of course, this study of Barth, history, and nationalism is no different; the humor is simply the principal medium through which these other significant ideas are transmitted. Between the various takes on the subject by the *Primer* authors, however, one can construct a fairly extensive, workable understanding of the history and study of humor.

If one wants to trace the development of “humor” through history, one would need to look first to the Greeks and Romans.¹ Amy Carrell (“Historical Views of Humor”) notes that in classical Greek and Roman rhetorical theory humor was first associated with “malice, hostility, derision, aggression, disparagement, and/or superiority” (313). Although we popularly associate laughter with warm feeling, the oldest humorous mode was aggressive, and it is this mode that appears quite prominently in Cooke’s poem and Barth’s novel. Neither writer spares the vitriol in their treatment of the inept factor (in the poem) and Eben (in the novel) because these characters ultimately represent the ideas and value systems the authors wish to criticize. Willibald Ruch states that there was a move toward a humor that relied less on “‘put down’ witticisms” by the end of the seventeenth century—here, “[t]he term ‘humor’ acquired its positive . . . meaning” and “virtuous” use of humor (versus “false” or “bad” usage focusing on “peculiarities of temperament” that people could not control)

included the ability to “smile kindly at an imperfect world” and to “laugh at one’s misfortunes” (46).

The changing attitude toward humor, from aggressive corrective to good-natured self-deprecation did not eliminate the malicious or aggressive approach. In fact, this concept of aggressive humor as an attack persisted through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, though the philosopher Immanuel Kant emphasized the possibility of incongruity as the root and purpose of humor in the eighteenth century, and still later, in the twentieth, Freud supplied the release theory, which is perhaps the most easily understood, insofar as it means what it seems to mean. In short, laughter releases tension. We see this in the disarming smiles and little quips of a public speaker “breaking the ice” and defusing the tension prior to delivering an address. These are the three primary categories or classes of humor: “cognitive/perceptual or incongruity, social/behavioral or disparagement, and psychoanalytical or release/relief” (Carrell 306-9); however, other humor scholars, like Patricia Keith-Spiegel, have proposed further specialization of the categories. Keith-Spiegel, Carrell notes, describes *eight*, yet the alternatives still “essentially conflate to these three major groups” (310). These main three categories are further supported and emphasized by other scholars like the linguist Salvatore Attardo, for example.

In his “Psychology of Humor,” Willibald Ruch focuses primarily on the humor of incongruity (“cognitive/perceptual”) and identifies the “structural properties of jokes and cartoons” as just as important as their content when it comes to pinpointing what factor evokes laughter. Ruch further qualifies these structures as “incongruity-resolution (INC-RES) humor and nonsense (NON) humor”: The former “are characterized by punch lines in which the surprising incongruity can be completely resolved. The common element in this

type of humor is that the recipient first discovers an incongruity which is then fully resolved upon consideration of information available elsewhere in the joke or cartoon” (48); the latter, however, according to Ruch, McGhee, and Hehl, “may (1) provide no resolution at all, (2) provide a partial resolution (leaving an essential part of the incongruity unresolved), or (3) actually create new absurdities or incongruities” (qtd. in Ruch 49). The key distinction between the two structures, which I will collectively refer to throughout as “the humor of incongruity” (without the INC-RES or NON abbreviations used by Ruch), is that the nonsense humor actually exploits the audience’s ability to resolve the incongruity—they detect the incongruity and are “misled” to solve it, only to find out that what seemed to make sense as a solution does not actually work (49).

As Kant theorized and Katrina E. Triezenberg emphasizes in her essay “Humor in Literature,” the comedic effect of the humor of incongruity depends upon the sudden emergence of the incompatible scripts (540-1)—the moment the incongruity is resolved (or the realization dawns that the situation is absurd and *cannot* be resolved) is the moment when the humorous effect is achieved. In his own essay focusing on the linguistics of humor, Attardo argues that “[b]ecause the incongruity theories are essentialist (i.e., the attempt to pinpoint what makes humor funny), linguistics has tended to side (largely unwittingly) with this kind of theory,” though they have also had some interest in the “hostility theories” (aggression) and “liberation theories” (release) as well (104). Although I am no linguist, and both Carrell and Ruch suggest general ways of explicating humorous scripts, the linguists Raskin and Attardo provide the most effective, formulaic (but structured) method for analyzing the humor of incongruity that is often employed by Cooke and Barth. I will use Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin’s script opposition theory and General Theory of Verbal

Humor (GTVH), outlined by Triezenberg, to read the humor in Barth and Cooke's work. In essence, the GTVH examines six possible dimensions of a joke: the script opposition (SO), the joke's target (TA), the logical mechanism used to resolve the SO (LM), the situation of the joke (SI), the language used in the telling of the joke (LA), and the narrative strategy the joke employs (NS) (536). One is still committing the cardinal sin of explaining why a joke is funny, but the form which the GTVH imposes renders the process of explicating some of the more involved jokes in the texts more structured and potentially less subjective, given that there is a formula in play.

While Cooke's poem and Barth's novel do employ incongruities to great comedic effect, they also mount aggressively humorous attacks against their protagonists as a part of their critique. Although scholars credit different types of humor, the fact remains that the aggressive mode is the oldest and most prevalent and has had many notable advocates, including Aristotle, Cicero, Hobbes, Hegel, Bain, and Henri Bergson (Carrell 313).

Bergson's views are of note here—and very relevant to the discussion of the development of American humor (beginning with the Puritans)—as he “dourly calls laughter and, therefore, humor, a social ‘corrective’ . . .” (305). This sentiment is echoed by the linguist Wallace Chafe's concept of *disabling theory*: the idea that humor is “evolutionarily advantageous” because it can be used to “disable” any speaker or authority figure who “begins to pursue lines of thought that lead to absurdities, contradictions, etc.” (Attardo 104). Don and Alleen Nilsen (“Literature and Humor”) take this concept a step further. In the literary mode, satire serves a function similar to the one ascribed by Bergson and Chafe to the humor of aggression. In their essay, the Nilsens refer to Leonard Feinberg's *Introduction to Satire* (1967), which identifies its corrective nature—specifically, “people who write satire have a

clear vision of what they want society to be” (253); and, as such, satirists use wit, sarcasm, irony, cynicism, and “most often exaggeration” to explode the issues in need of change (254). Likewise, Northrop Frye argues that satire requires “an implicit moral standard” (253), which means that the satirist’s critique suggests a course for correcting the undesirable behaviors being indicted.

Given this emphasis, one does not have to reach far to make the connection between satire and a uniquely American style of humor. While many colonists wrote their share of letters and humorous accounts of events in the New World, one of the earliest humorous texts with a clear indictment was produced by the Puritans who, contrary to popular opinion, *did* laugh and also produced the New England preacher and satirist Nathaniel Ward, whose *Simple Cobbler of Aggawam* (1646) possessed “a grim sort” of humor with a decidedly corrective bent: directed against the extravagant dress of women, for example (Holliday 17-25). Ward was the first to publish such a document, and the Puritans, of all people, who “fought sin and everything else in the neighborhood,” became the first to birth a writer on American soil to write “with malice aforethought and with the intention of publishing . . .” (17). Holliday further suggests that “[y]our boisterous humorist seems to have flourished at this period far better in the Southern colonies than in the Northern” (37), which is why, perhaps, the historical Ebenezer Cooke who dubbed his Sot-Weed poem a “satyr” “must have been very ashamed of his verses, for he has left scarcely a trace of a record about himself” (38). By labeling his work as satirical, however, Cooke associates it with the concept of humor as a corrective or critique; therefore, one must read and interpret the Sot-Weed poem with an eye to what less than desirable behaviors the poet is trying to correct.

The dearth of information on Cooke himself aside, the tone of the poem and the satirical mode in which it is composed is inherently American given its hyperbolic treatment of vice or unacceptable behavior. Furthermore, this tendency to exaggerate is noted by Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill in their book *America's Humor* as one of the aspects of American humor that differentiates it from that of other countries. Visitors who came to America, “questioned natives, and then published their impressions decided that Americans had two irritating habits: 1) They bragged too much. 2) They distrusted everybody” (39); and so, “[w]hen literary critics decided that our writers were creating distinctive humor and tried to define its nature, they spotted an outstanding element that was closely related to boasting [and bragging]: *exaggeration*” (40). In 1852, a British theorist described the spirit “that pervades all American humour” as one that is “at times sly and sarcastic . . . as fond of exposing a presumed simplicity of ignorance, as it is of dressing up an act of cleverness utterly regardless of principle; [and it is] almost always rude” (qtd. in Blair and Hill 41). Still later, Andrew Lang posited that there was “nothing of the social flunkeyism” in American satire that he saw in the British variety—“The most peculiarly American fun has . . . lacked reverence [and] . . . has always dared to speak out” as it has “habitually buffooned . . . saints and more sacred persons” (qtd. in Blair and Hill 41). The “Great American Joke,” according to Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in 1973, is based upon the observation of the disparity between the ideal and the more unsavory reality—“on the disparity between the American dream and the reality” (42).

I would argue that satire is exceedingly American in this regard, as it consistently explodes the difference between the imagined ideal and the failures of the real world to achieve that ideal; nevertheless, I would also like to reiterate the point made by the Nilsens,

by way of Feinberg, above: Satire, a corrective and aggressive humorous mode that often deals in the “grotesque” (exaggeration) to make its point, also turns upon “a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque . . .” (253). In other words, satire requires the reader to recognize an incongruous relationship between the implicit moral standard and the “bad” behavior being exhibited in defiance of that standard, even if the intent of the humor is not strictly Puritanical. In fact, Robert Micklus notes in his introduction to *The Comic Genius of Dr. Alexander Hamilton* that while there was once a distinction between “true” and “false” satire—“true” satire being good-natured, while the “false” was personal and “ill-natured”—as the concept of the comic evolved, *all* satire came to be regarded as “false,” and the “true” version was replaced with what we generally understand to be comedy (16). Of course, Micklus also offers the disclaimer that the mutual exclusivity of “good-natured” and “satire” is probably not correct (17), suggesting as well that exact, clinical distinctions between humorous modes are hard to make. After all, is the airing of aggressions not also a form of release? Could jokes meant to slander not also offer incongruities or absurdities? Ultimately, while the three categories of humor may not necessarily be interchangeable, they seem, at least, to be interconnected. While I will be using the GTVH to read some of the humor that relies upon incongruities in Barth and Cooke’s writing, there is still an aggressive, corrective, and satirical edge to their comedy, suggesting, as I have noted, that there is potential for overlap with regard to the categorization of the humor used.

Likewise, reducing a writer to a single label, such as “satirist,” poses the same problem of suggesting a mutual exclusivity amongst humorous modes. David Morrell discusses the issue of labeling an author like Barth—as a “black humorist,” for example—in his *John Barth: An Introduction*. The problem is, simply put, that Barth himself expresses a

distaste for labels. Morrell notes that there is some “unifying principle” in the work of Barth and discusses the possibility that it is, as critics like Bruce Jay Friedman have suggested, the aforementioned black humor; however, Morrell then quotes a statement from Barth in which the author defines the term as he sees it. To Barth, black humor entails a certain amount of social critique (such writers are “*responsible*” to the times in which they live) that he does not see in his work. Instead, he feels that “[y]our teller of stories will likely be responsive to his time; he needn’t be responsible to it” (qtd. in Morrell, “John Barth: His Fiction, 1968” 98). In the interview collected by Gado in his book, Barth offers a similar assessment of his work (much like his 1965 interview with *The Wisconsin Review*), claiming, again, that while there may be social criticism in his work, “the kind of thinking associated with social criticism has been, for [him], a source of material rather than of themes” (129-130). His “social consciousness,” he argues, is real and an inevitable side effect of living through the 1960s and 1970s, yet he still maintains that social conditions are “reflected in [his] fiction” (130)—*reflected* is the operative term which, of course, recalls the passage used by Morrell. Barth conceives of his work as a result of the place and time(s) in which he lives and writes rather than as something crafted to directly critique said place and time(s). Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug echo this sentiment in their *Understanding John Barth*: “While still not as obsessed with confronting social constructs as [others], Barth does not ignore the contextual nature of the reality in which he currently lives” (216). In essence, one *can* but also possibly *should not* read for social critique in Barth’s work. The issue of authorial intent (even written or spoken claims of intent), after all, is only as significant as the theoretical altar at which one worships chooses to allow it to be. In this case, I elect to read for social criticism since the humorous modes often attributed to Barth, of parody or satire or black humor entail an

indictment of some kind. Short of resorting simply to nonsense humor, there is some kind of standard being invoked, referenced, or criticized by humor that is aggressively critical or even just incongruous.

Barth's aversion to labels is worth considering though, as it appears in multiple interviews, as well as in the writer's "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), a follow-up to "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth delineates modern and postmodern literature (the latter, he argues, is inherently inclined to be metafictional), but he also writes about his own literary career and the subjectivity of labels, including existentialist, black humorist, modernist, and postmodernist. No matter what label one is awarded, though, the fact is that one will always be "praised or damned" for that perceived identity (196). The best writers, Barth suggests, will transcend these labels (200). As someone who has written through the '50s, '60s, and '70s, Barth has had some experience with these changing trends, and given the amount of time he spends discussing the mutability of identity in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, his resistance to titles like "black humorist" makes perfect sense. After "comic," the term most often used by the aforementioned critics to describe Barth's work is "parody." Barth does not explicitly refute this perception of his work, and given the attention it has heretofore been paid, though (again) not to the extent I propose or using a system of analysis like the GTVH of Raskin and Attardo, the appellation is one worth examining on my own terms.

Reading Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (italicized by some and bound in quote marks by others) is much less problematic in the sense that Cooke is a historical non-entity, as previously-noted, and has nothing to say about how his work ought to be read. The poem is short enough that in-depth readings of its humor (such as the one on offer from

Sarah Ford) are possible and have been done. Furthermore, there is no debate to resolve regarding the comic nature of Cooke's piece. He labels it a "satyr," after all, and a satire it is. The only questions demanding critical attention are the purpose and direction of the satire. Critics such as Elaine Safer, Robert D. Arner, Chris Beyers, and Sarah Ford discuss, among other things, the intended audience of Cooke's poem. Like many so-called "early American" writers, it is likely that Cooke saw himself as British (Micklus 1). Leo Lemay certainly reads as much in Cooke's "The History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia," suggesting that "Cooke never resolved where his sympathies lay" (qtd. in Beyers 69); therefore, the question becomes whether Cooke is satirizing only the colonists (the vulgar rustics who ultimately take his sot-weed factor for everything he has) or the British (whose refined sensibilities were unsuited to the harsh, untamed landscape of the New World). One could make an argument for either or both through the text. Beyers notes that critics such as Cy Charles League have also focused on the "ironic distinction" between Cooke the writer and the persona of his poem (qtd. in Beyers 18). Biographical information on Cooke is scant, but the common practices of academe dictate, naturally, that we assume a certain distance between the poet and the "I" of the piece, do not conflate personal pronouns with their seeming referents, and thus avoid making the mistake of assuming that what seems to be true, particularly of history, is, in fact, true.

Mutability in "Historical" Narratives and National Identities

On the subject of historical accuracy, Bernard Lewis makes the case in *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* that the history we are taught and which we often conceive of as true may in fact be false. For example, "What if anything did happen on the Fourth of July and was it that day anyway? . . . The winning of American independence was

a long-drawn-out and complex process, but the popular imagination . . . telescoped it into a single dramatic event on a single date suitable for annual celebration” (50). Even during the time period in which Barth was writing *The Sot-Weed Factor* (the mid- to late '50s), “the primary objective in American studies was to reconstruct our past to help explain our present identity as a nation” (Micklus 1). Barth himself admits feeling something along those lines in the Gado interview: “Though I was not a patriotic writer, I had feelings about America. In the late 1950s . . . I had a feeling comparable (but ironically) to the one Virgil must have had about Rome . . .” (118). Of course, that was Barth in the '50s. By the time of the interview in 1971, he describes his work of researching the colonial period in Maryland as follows: “I love that phase of our history, and I remember it with pleasure because of the apocalyptic feeling that we all have about America at the moment” (118). By discussing mutability of identity and history in Barth’s work, one is necessarily also dealing with two dovetailing lines of thought in fiction writing and in the discipline of history. Barth says, “I was deep into the idea of the mythical America by that time [in the 1950s]” (118). These elements of fiction, history, and myth find an outlet in the character of Eben Cooke in Barth’s novel.

As noted above, Colacurcio makes the claim that reconstructionist approaches to American literary history are reductive. The trick, Colacurcio argues, “is to continue to believe in the historical significance . . . of American literature without positing the existence of America as a metaphysical entity . . .” (130). Effectively studying the history of American literature necessitates foregoing popular notions of America as a mythic or metaphysical state—“some putative whole.” By the '70s and '80s, writes Gordon S. Wood, historians in particular “seemed to have lost a unified sense of purpose; without a clear sense any longer of America’s role in history, the discipline [of history] seemed to be coming apart” (3).

The fragmentation of a single homogenized historical narrative to include previously-omitted or repressed perspectives—those of women, minorities, and Native Americans—has led some historians to question the “purpose of the past.” As Wood notes, “We Americans, unlike Europeans, have tended to see our history as the product of conscious intentions and purposeful leadership. We have not usually thought of ourselves as caught up in large impersonal forces sweeping us along to destinies we have not chosen” (30). In her essay on ahistoricism and New Historicism, Catherine Gimelli Martin sums up the views of both historical revisionists and New Historicists in the mid-seventies. In short, both approaches agreed that “revolutionary change was something of an illusion,” and history was essentially “‘just one damned thing after another’: a force without real agents, ideals, or goals” (22). This belief in a universe without order is both modern and postmodern, though one might say that we have only now begun to accept the instability of the past and in the national identity it buttresses. This development poses problems for both the historical discipline and our popular understanding of history, as Wood observes: “[I]t seemed as if Hayden White’s contention, that historians were actually writing forms of fiction, which he had been making for many years, was at last being vindicated” (5). Americans, writes Wood, remain resistant to “this kind of historical consciousness. We do not want to hear about the unusability and pastness of the past or about the limitations within which people in the past were obliged to act” (14).

This fallibility of the past as a means to preserving a national identity is one of the primary concerns of Lewis. History, he writes, “is a phenomenon which began in Europe at the time of the Renaissance and remains to the present day primarily a concern and an achievement of West European civilization and of its daughters and disciples in other parts of

the world” (54). Furthermore, Lewis explores the issues of historical revision or sanitation by ruling powers (53), the use of the past as a means to justify the present—“a present, *some* present” (55, emphasis added)—or unsavory behavior at some previous time: the American “opening of the west” and subsequent mass displacement of native people, for example (57). Lewis argues that “although most peoples and groups ‘arise from humble origins,’ they seek to replace that unremarkable (or even shameful) past with something more palatable” (59). This desire to create a nationalistic history that affirms a people’s identity even appears in colonialist scenarios in colonized areas of Asia and Africa, where rather than face the incursion of foreign control (including beliefs and practices) into the native systems, the “history” was instead revised by the people living in those areas. After all, “[t]he hurt was much eased . . . if it could be shown that what was borrowed was not foreign at all but was something native which the foreigners themselves had borrowed at an earlier date” (67). The contemporary critical awareness of history, then, is of a dubiously sanctified foundation for the nation-state. This consciousness was developing during the time that Barth was writing *The Sot-Weed Factor*, so it makes sense to read for this issue in the textual *reflections* from the exterior world that appear in the novel.

During this same time period (’50s, ’60s, ’70s), the American literary landscape was also undergoing a similar transformation (from certainty to uncertainty) from one of attempted realism and accurate depictions of reality to one more concerned with the processes of fiction itself as notions of “reality” and “identity” became an increasingly uncertain concepts. Frank Gado, Philip Roth, and John W. Aldridge discuss this transition in some depth in their respective works. In the introduction to his book of interviews, Gado offers the insight that American writing prior to the ’50s was “essentially” realist in nature,

and, as such, writers still “presumed an iclastic [sic] correspondence between experience and the conventions of fiction” (xxxii). Even after the Second World War, the expectation for writing remained unchanged, though the spirit of the times was much altered. Readers and critics expected writers to continue producing works as they had before (like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Wolfe), but there was something dissatisfactory about realism in a world of television. According to Gado, television “has blurred the dividing line,” muddying the “clear demarcation between life and its representation” upon which realism relied (xxxiii). Furthermore, television “pre-empted” the realistic mode by giving viewers a glut of stories at a time, and, the quality of the narratives aside, the audience was sated with this mode because the visual medium of television could capture more easily (and efficiently) human beings living their lives (xxxiv).

In his essay “Writing American Fiction” (1961), Roth reflects on the state of fiction writing during this time period along similar, realism-centered lines: “Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination” (Roth). In essence, truth (as presented by mass media) has become stranger than fiction, and what is left for American writers to do? Roth suggests that, dissatisfied with depicting reality, writers might turn to historical novels, contemporary satire, nothing at all, or “turn to other matters, or to other worlds; or to the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, or even the impulse for his technique” (Roth). This turn inward, away from attempting to capture what Gado describes as “the altered perceptions of reality” (xxxiv), is implicit in Roth’s essay but made explicit by Gado and Aldridge using the term

“fabulation” (what we also call “metafiction”): “It comes from *The Fabulators* by Robert Scholes, who in turn got it from one of the first books printed in Britain. . . . [I]t signifies a narrative in which the author has had great joy arranging words, designing structures, developing ideas” (Morrell, “John Barth: His Fiction, 1968” 99). Gado says fabulation “strikes away from experience and the notions of order in the world” (xxxv). As such, it is a mode of writing that, to quote Barth’s definition of postmodern writing (and metafiction) in “The Literature of Replenishment,” “is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world” (200).

The move away from realism might have been motivated by the rise of television or by disgust with the reality portrayed therein, or it may have been precipitated by the decline of “an identifiably American tradition. . . . which motivated so many of the previous generation’s novels . . .”, as “the concept of self has become too problematical and the notion of purposive history too disjointed [in] a society which has lost faith in its communal goals” (Gado xxxv). One might, then, attribute the turn toward fabulation/metafiction in the postmodern period to a loss of a sense of shared history and national identity. Conversely, Aldridge argues that the turn to historical works or novels of fabulation (I posit that *The Sot-Weed Factor* is both) has also been influenced by “the events and metaphysical climate of the past two decades [which] have had a decidedly debilitating effect on [our] ability to achieve a critical or satirical perspective on [our] society” (“Jogging Towards Bethlehem” 153). Aldridge is primarily talking about the “youth culture” of the ’60s, in particular, and the increased attention paid to social justice causes, in general—and while “there are elements in the youth movement that are open to satire on these grounds. . . . the difference is that the young have right and righteousness, at least in principle, on their side. . . . [S]o much of it is

morally unimpeachable that to satirize it would be to impugn the good principles on which it is based” (155). Writers may be influenced by a world in need of critique but that precludes critique because of its general well-meaningness to “escape into a protective preoccupation with the self” (157). The current climate of social reform may impugn on American writers’ willingness to resort to a historically American humorous mode (the satire of the Puritans), thus further subverting a sense of our national identity as writers and humorists while also driving modern writers with a point to make into the past.

Chapter One

**Sot-Weed Origins: The Conception of the Novel,
Its Humor, and Historical Doubt**

Little is known concerning the life of Ebenezer Cooke—the seventeenth century English poet who wrote a biting “satyr” and poem called *The Sot-Weed Factor* about a British tobacco merchant (the eponymous “sot-weed factor”) who travels to the colony of Maryland and is disgusted by the distinct lack of cultural refinement that he finds. He is appalled at the ways in which the colonists have “gone native,” while his subjects are themselves none too pleased by the antics of the bumbling merchant and ultimately take him for everything he has. After self-publishing *The Sot-Weed Factor* in 1708, Cooke went on to write “a handful of other poems: four occasional elegies (at the foot of which he tantalizingly appends to his name the title ‘Laureate of Maryland’); a not-so-funny satire on Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia; a late and rather heavy sequel to ‘Sot-Weed’ . . . ; and a revised and less biting edition of ‘The Sot-Weed Factor’ itself” (Barth iii).

At the time of the 1865 reprinting of the original Sot-Weed poem, Cooke remained a virtual unknown who “wrote, printed, published, and sold it in London for sixpence sterling, and then disappeared forever” (Cooke iii). There is no critical anthology of Cooke’s work and no book-length criticism.² It is a wonder, then, that Barth, writing in a pre-internet era, came across the name at all, which only “appears on certain Maryland real-estate transactions and other legal documents and petitions in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the

early decades of the eighteenth, as well as on ‘The Sot-Weed Factor’ and a handful of other poems . . .” (Barth iii). The historical Ebenezer Cooke was effectively a nonentity.

Barth’s original intention during his “literary apprentice days” after finishing college was to write a series of tale cycles, “in which stories frame other stories framing other stories and so forth,” focused on the tidewater Maryland area, spread throughout its history and extending “perhaps into some kind of imagined future” (Gado, “John Barth” 115). Barth writes, however, that the larger project “proved beyond my capacity,” though he saved “the attendant historical homework for possible future use” (Barth iii). Barth was already familiar with Cooke Point, “a long, narrow, much-eroded strip of woods and farmland where the broad Choptank River meets the even broader Chesapeake Bay” named by Andrew Cooke (Ebenezer Cooke’s father), who built a manor house on his estate there in the 1660s which was jointly bequeathed to Ebenezer and his sister, Anna, who were born in England and later sold the land they inherited in the colonies (iii).

Cooke became a viable subject for Barth again when in 1956 the time came for him to write the third novel in the sequence that included *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* and which Barth conceived of as a spiritual trilogy of works “all dealing with the problem of nihilism . . .” (Gado, “John Barth” 116). However, while the first two books were set in modern times and were composed relatively quickly—about six months apiece according to Barth in his introduction to *The Sot-Weed Factor*—“[t]he third . . . turned out to be much more different than [Barth] originally thought. It turned into an extravagant novel, an extravaganza from history . . .” (117). This novel took four years to write—six shy of Barth’s estimated ten (Barth iv). Morrell traces the development of *The Sot-Weed Factor* in some detail, while also offering further suppositions regarding Barth’s intentions in

composing it. For example, “[Barth] would . . . be implicitly contrasting the world view of the seventeenth century with that of the twentieth century and getting much thematic mileage out of the contrast . . .” (“Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus” 32). I will be doing something similar in my reading of Barth, of course, and it is worth observing, since my subject is humor, that according to Morrell, “Barth also wanted to use Cooke’s title because he wanted to take advantage of its puns”—a “factor” in the literal sense refers to a merchant, but it also means “a maker, an author, and that is what the historic and the imaginary Eben Cookes fancy themselves. That is what Barth is: the factor of *The Sot-Weed Factor*” (32).

Additionally, Morrell says Barth was likely delighted with the “sketchiness” of Cooke’s biography, as it “gave him a chance to play loose with history and imagine as fantastic a version of Cooke’s life as he wished;” furthermore, Barth was free to make up “his own history of early Maryland” (36), a place and time that proved in his research to be nearly as strange as fiction anyway. Barth alludes to these departures from historical record in the novel itself, writes Morrell, when he has his Eben Cooke declare that his own poem of the Maryland province shall be a work of fiction (39). Because Barth also borrows from the conventions of eighteenth-century novels, including their length (32), *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a twentieth-century novel written in an eighteenth-century style about events occurring in the seventeenth century, many of which are fictionalized or altered by Barth to improve their humorous effect.

One of the first changes Barth makes from Cooke’s history to his fabrication is the poet’s country of origin. As previously noted, Cooke seems to have been born in England, but Barth relocates his place of birth to America (though his father removes him to England while he is still quite young), for the explicit literary purpose, according to Morrell, of having

a journey which comes full circle (37). Although, as Micklus notes, historically-speaking, the real Cooke would have seen himself as British—nothing approaching the notion of an “American” identity would have existed at the time—even if he had been born in the colonies, but Barth’s relocation of the place of birth serves to place him in a position where a homecoming of sorts is possible. How Cooke came to be in America is itself a matter of conjecture. The narrative persona of the original Sot-Weed poem makes only vague reference in the first few lines to his reasons for leaving home:

Condemn’d by Fate to way-ward Curse,
Of Friends unkind, and empty Purse;
Plagues worse than fill’d *Pandora’s* Box,
I took my leave of *Albion’s* Rocks:

With heavy Heart, concerned that I
Was forc’d my Native Soil to fly,
And the *Old World* must bid good-buy

But Heav’n ordain’d it should be so,
And to repine is vain we know. . . . (Cooke 1)

These first lines not only evoke the mythic qualities of England, but also liken Cooke’s factor’s situation to that of the Biblical prodigal son: Bereft of friends and funds, plagued to desperation, he is forced by heaven to leave home—or to return, as the prodigal son interpretation definitely makes more sense in Barth’s retelling. In either case, the circumstances surrounding Cooke’s factor’s departure are only suggested. However, in the novel, Barth devotes a sizeable chunk of the early story to establishing Eben in England before he ever begins his journey to the New World. For example, in part one (“The

Momentous Wager”) of Barth’s novel, readers are made aware of Ebenezer Cooke as an adult, are then shown his childhood and education, and are returned to his adult life for shenanigans involving the prostitute Joan Toast and the outcome (Eben’s exile to the colonies by his father). All of these events occur before Eben even begins to think about Maryland. During this lengthy section of the novel, readers are also introduced to Eben’s childhood tutor Henry Burlingame III, whose affinity for disguises and penchant for perversity will be discussed in greater detail later. What is of immediate importance here is the way that Barth is already playing with history and its sanctity. During a sequence at Cambridge, for example, Burlingame relates to Eben the story of how he, as a young student, toyed with the affections of Isaac Newton and Henry More. Both men were at Cambridge in 1670, and their ideological rivalry is a matter of history; however, what Barth adds to the story is the interference of Burlingame—“Barth postulates that their arguments were kept alive in part because they were both rivals for the love of a young man, and that their enmity resolved itself when they put away the boy and took to loving one another” (Morrell, “Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus” 40). This alteration to the historical record is only the beginning, however, of Barth’s subversion.

The tenth chapter of the first part of the novel, “A Brief Relation of the Maryland Palatinate, Its Origins and Struggles for Survival, as Told to Ebenezer by His Host,” is not brief at all. In it, Lord Baltimore (actually, Burlingame in the guise of Lord Baltimore) tells Eben the story of the Maryland province, as the young poet has come seeking an appointment to write his “*Marylandiad*” since his father has tired of his inaction and lack of drive and has ordered him to sail to the colonies to learn responsibility on the family tobacco plantation at Malden. The tale Baltimore/Burlingame spins chiefly involves the ongoing conflict and

intrigues between the government of the colony of Maryland and the plotter John Coode, who was himself a historical figure. Barth spent a year studying *The Archives of Maryland*, a series of bound volumes which contained the records of the colonial Assembly and the Governor's Council from the time of the province's founding to its ascension to statehood in 1776. In these readings, Barth "learned that the compilers of the Archives were as one in believing Lord Baltimore an extreme good man and John Coode an extreme villain;" however, he also "found evidence in the Archives . . . that Baltimore may have been a very oppressive governor and that Coode may have plotted against him for just reasons" (Morrell, "Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus" 40).

In the novel, Barth has Burlingame impersonate, at various times, both Lord Baltimore and John Coode (in addition to Ebenezer himself), prompting the fictional Cooke to question whether the men are actually good or evil, and to eventually wonder if they even exist as real people apart from Burlingame's disguises. Morrell argues that this is Barth's way of intentionally setting "the reader's head aspin" (32), while also demonstrating "how little we can be certain of what actually happened in history" (40). Reading the documents from the time period, says Barth, "one laughs in one's sleep." Pirates actually did sail up the Chesapeake (as they do in the novel's telling of the state history), and "[t]hey would capture the legislature, pillage the town, steal the state seal because there was forty poundsworth of silver in it, and sail down the Bay" (Gado, "John Barth" 118).

Although he claims to never have been strictly "patriotic," Barth says he "was deep into the idea of the mythical America [at] that time" when he read "those painfully earnest documents," in which the people of the province captured their fears "that cabals of the French and Indians, or of the Catholics and somebody else, were simply going to exterminate

the province at any moment” (118). Part of the humor of the Sot-Weed novel, then, is that all these fears are true and that Barth “‘found colonial history so fantastic’ that it had to be toned down for his ‘farcical’ novel” (Safer, *The Contemporary American Comic-Epic* 34). “Toned down” may not be the right phrase to describe *The Sot-Weed Factor*—as we shall see in the coming chapters—but what the notion of the book as one of many contemporary works that turn the American lens of satire upon “the traditional celebration of country,” and on “America’s past, present, and future” (43), suggests about Barth, whether he denies the accusation or not, is an intent to use the seeming irreverence of humor to offer insight on some monolithic issues that include the notion of the metaphysical America.

Chapter Two

Eben Cooke's Virtue and the Ideal of History

According to Gado, the “American Adam” is now a figure of parody (“Introduction,” xxxvi), and this description is apropos given Barth’s depiction of a young Eben Cooke who is, after all, not just “born American” but is also a self-professed virgin (Barth 4). The fact that Eben goes as far as to attach the appellation to himself in a somewhat official capacity makes a mockery of the concept of virtue as a defining element of one’s being (as was ostensibly the case for the young heroines of the eighteenth-century novel), which has been done before. In Henry Fielding’s picaresque novel *Joseph Andrews*, for example, the concept of virtue as a defining element of a person’s existence or identity (something worth dying for if violated) is similarly exploded when it is attached to that book’s titular *male* character. Speaking to Burlingame of his virginity, Eben declares, “[Y]et it pointeth not to Eden or to Bethlehem, but to my soul. I prize it not as a virtue, but as the very emblem of my self, and when I call me *virgin and poet* ’tis not more boast than who should say I’m male and English” (157, emphasis added).

Thanks to the enduring double standard regarding human sexuality which acknowledges men to be sexual beings while women must pretend at virtual sexlessness for fear of shaming, the notion of “male virtue”—and especially that of the male virgin in modern times—is one that generates laughs because of the seeming mutual exclusivity of its constituents and the cultural tradition of men as randy tomcats. Virginity is something to conceal rather than celebrate for men. The fact that Eben is a thirty-year-old virgin and that

he continually trumpets this fact from the proverbial rooftops renders him (as well as the concept of virtue with which he is associated) ludicrous to modern readers. Such readers especially will find additional comic resonance in the characterization of Cooke given the way that modern society (and Hollywood especially) has made the comedic male virgin a mainstay of popular culture. Films like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Superbad* (2007), and *Sex Drive* (2008), though released decades after *The Sot-Weed Factor* and therefore hardly contemporaneous, are the logical extension of ideas going back to Fielding and beyond. The issue of virtue is a universal one, and that of male virtue is, it seems, a universally humorous one.

That being said, Barth is still using “the dialects of the late seventeenth century” as a “wide canvas” onto which he paints characters “beset with ailments that . . . [are] primarily modern,” thus creating a “comic suspension between two historical periods [that] provides a breezily detached perspective upon the agonies of both” (Joseph 24). The fact that the outspoken virgin professes his love for a prostitute (Joan Toast), writes a poem about his love for her, and then nearly rapes her on several occasions when he mistakes her identity all contributes to the image of Eben as a bumbler who, as Burlingame aptly puts it, “travel[s] as’t were asleep,” and who becomes a tarnished self-styled paragon (Barth 157). Eben’s ineptitude characterizes him as a fool and colors the causes he champions: namely those of virtue and of a sanitized reality that does not exist in any capacity. The fact that Eben, the self-professed exemplar of virtue, continually stumbles and makes a fool of himself, coupled with “[t]he actuality of ‘beshitten Maryland’ throws such lofty expectation into grotesque relief” (Joseph 26). Although there are certainly propagandistic or opportunistic motives for whitewashing history like Lewis suggests in his writing, most people are probably aware, at

least on some level, that the stuff of high school Social Studies and American History is not the whole story.

Living in the real world from day to day—literally experiencing what will become the history of the future—we know that there are few actual paragons. It stands to reason that our history (the history of the present) was likewise troublesome when it was actually occurring. Barth's novel simply makes this fact explicit. As Joseph notes, "From such actual historical personages as the several Lord Baltimores, Henry More, Isaac Newton, William Claiborne, and John Coode down to the lowliest besotted tobacco planter, all is bleared [in the novel] with comic sludge. . . . For every imposing historical reputation there is a 'secret historie' . . ." (26). This "enthusiastic mock realism" appears on the page to share the lexical qualities of an eighteenth-century novel, as well as the heft (26). Ultimately, though, *The Sot-Weed Factor* "exhibits" rather than hides its fictitiousness through increasingly absurd scenarios wherein, for instance, Burlingame is revealed to have masqueraded as if not actually *been* a variety of historical figures, including Coode, Lord Baltimore, and Colonel Peter Sayer (Walkiewicz 45). Thus does the ideological feud between Newtown and More that is a matter of historical record become a spat over a young boy which ends with the two shacking up themselves.

By trivializing "mythological patterning, Barth, of course, uses the traditional vehicle of parody"—at times, to create a "purposeful violation of decorum" (60). If some elements of the story, like the secret eggplant ritual through which John Smith is able to strengthen his member to breach Pocahontas's maidenhead in order to save himself and his crew while restoring honor to Powhatan's tribe, seem grandiose and purposefully tasteless, they likely are, at least according to E. P. Walkiewicz. Whether Barth set out to make a salient point

about history—or whether he simply found a story he liked and, being a consummate storyteller, resolved to tell it—*The Sot-Weed Factor* revels in the tawdry, “secret” details of history through humor. As I previously noted in the introduction, the device of parody is one that more than a few critics have associated with Barth and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and since parody is, after all, a leveling of criticism at a particular subject, one needs to first establish Barth’s methods before investigating how he deploys it against his principle target, history and, by extension, those such as his protagonist Eben Cooke who idealize it.

With regard to the general humorous tendencies of the novel, in *The Muses of John Barth*, Max Schulz identifies *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a parody of the *Bildungsroman* (xvi), though I could see it containing elements of the *Künstlerroman* as well—Ebenezer Cooke the imaginative child grows up to become the idealistic adult poet who realizes with time that the sort of virtuous art he seeks to produce will, out of necessity, be a lie since the real world is not a virtuous or classically mythic place. Schulz also critiques the term “parody,” in general, and its application to Barth’s writing in particular, however. He describes it as “reductionist” insofar as it overly simplifies and proves inadequate “for explaining the intertextually interpretive and fictively creative act that has characterized Barth’s fiction. . . . Barth’s stories are less copies, or parodies, than independent versions of the myths done in late twentieth-century idiom, and intended as legitimate expressions of our time honoring universal human nature . . .” (xvi).

Schulz also cites an interview with Barth where the author of *The Sot-Weed Factor* makes the distinction between a pastiche and a parody—his novel, he claims, is not altogether the latter, though it features an “element” of it (particularly in its use of the language of the eighteenth century), and it is instead “mainly an echo and not an imitation”

(qtd. in Schulz xvi). Patricia Tobin supports this distinction and offers the further suggestion that while a parody focuses on a single author or piece of work (it is essentially a one-for-one reproduction with the added element of the critique), pastiche technically presents as more of a “mélange of motifs and techniques borrowed from multiple sources by an author who has the highest respect for them” (“*The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960): Discontinuity Through Repetition” 56). Of course, as noted in the introduction of this project, what Barth claims to be true of his work and what one chooses to read for can be two entirely different things. “Pastiche” and “parody,” of course, are synonyms, and making a fine distinction between them seems, at best, a diversion best appreciated by one ensconced in the world of the academy, where splitting hairs sometimes seems preferable to calling a spade a spade.

The term “parody” denotes a work that is “imitative” but that can also be a “takeoff” or “spoof.” For example, *The Sot-Weed Factor* bears the episodic, rambling, ribald markers of the picaresque tradition, and there does not seem to be anything particularly vitriolic about acknowledging this connection—unless, that is, one intends the book to be something greater as Schulz professes (high literature perhaps), but, again, the intentionality behind the work is neither here nor there. The fact that we can see a bit of academe’s serious attention to terminology, labeling, and schools of thought in the previously mentioned interview with Barth is somewhat ironic given that A) he has elsewhere professed a dislike for labelling things, and B) he spends quite a bit of time in *The Sot-Weed Factor* poking fun at the academy and high-mindedness by utterly humiliating Eben Cooke, whose obsession with virtue becomes representative of the sanitizing impulses often tied to the writing of history.

The notion that there is some sort of indictment at work in the novel—either of history, of Eben’s virtue, or simply of academe—brings us back to satire, which is a term

slightly less often applied to *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Barth but which I believe is as applicable a label as “parody.” This can be a problematic label as well given Barth’s insistence that *The Sot-Weed Factor* is not a social critique and Tobin’s claim that “[s]atire, in any case, is not often great art. In dealing with the ridiculous, satire reduces itself somehow. [Likewise,] [p]arody tends to be merely grotesque about what it ridicules and becomes an oddity because of its exaggeration” (“Cosmopsis and Cosmophily” 113). Here, once more, one finds some sort of anxiety regarding the classification of Barth’s novel that turns upon a fear that it might be somehow lessened by its association with a certain type of humor. Tobin acknowledges that there are elements of both parody and satire in *The Sot-Weed Factor* but also resists placing the novel in a single category: “Is the *Sot-Weed Factor* parody, travesty, or farce? Is it an imitation or a debunking of history?—[This question] occurs partially because Barth exercises all these available options . . .” (“*The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960): Discontinuity Through Repetition” 58). The discussion outlined in the past several paragraphs regarding the classification of *The Sot-Weed Factor* is highly subjective. Other than insisting that it is either more than a parody or *better* than a satire, there seems to be no compelling reason why it could not be either or both. It is clearly picaresque (making it either a picaresque novel or a parody of one), and the fact that there is some criticism leveled at characters like Eben suggests a potential satirical indictment as well. It is parodic of the novels of the time period in which it is set, satirical in the sense that there are clear indictments of certain behaviors and worldviews (to be enumerated in greater detail below), and ultimately comes out none the worse for wear because of either. The target of much of this humor-cum-criticism is the fictional Cooke; therefore, now is as good a time as any to look at the humorous characterization of Barth’s protagonist and what that means for the

novel as a whole, as well as my assertion regarding the ways that this treatment of the work's main character critiques ideas of an idealized history.

The first paragraph of the first chapter of the novel sets the tone for what is to follow in terms of Barth's treatment of the fictional Eben Cooke:

IN THE LAST YEARS of the Seventeenth Century there was to be found among the fops and fools of the London coffee-houses one rangy, gangling flitch called Ebenezer Cooke, more ambitious than talented, and yet more talented than prudent, who, like his friends-in-folly, all of whom were supposed to be educating at Oxford or Cambridge, had found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over, and so rather than applying himself to the pains of scholarship, had learned the knack of versifying, and ground out quires of couplets after the fashion of the day, afroth with *Joves* and *Jupiters*, aclang with jarring rhymes, and string-taut with similes stretched to the snapping-point. (3)

First of all, what should be self-evident about this “paragraph” is that it is actually one long sentence. Eben is introduced to the reader in a harried, haphazard way that befits his character and his appearance—“[H]e stood—nay, *angled*—nineteen hands high. His clothes were good stuff well tailored, but they hung on his frame like luffed sails. . . . [H]is every stance was angular surprise, his each gesture half flail. Moreover there was a discomposure about his face, as though his features got on ill together” (3). He is one among many “fops and fools,” though ultimately “not better nor worse than this fellows” (3). He is a “gangling flitch” with more ambition than actual talent, and more talent than prudence, who has learned the “knack of versifying.” His poetry is “ground” out in “quires,” “afroth” and “aclang” (3).

On some level, Barth is clearly having a good time here throwing together words with interesting and evocative sounds that, nonetheless, somehow get at the character of Eben by suggesting his ungainly physicality through creative syntax and diction. The humor is in the sheer variety of unusual terms or phrases on display here, which, again, correspond with the characteristics of Eben, who is excessively awkward and (we learn in chapter two) prone to fits of anxiety that leave him unable to act at all.

This immediate skewering of Eben at the outset of the novel might suggest that he is in for the reaming of a lifetime over the course of the 700-odd pages that follow. That is at least partially correct, though I do not think Barth is completely unsympathetic to the character. As we will shortly see, part of Barth's critique in the novel and where he occasionally aims his satire is squarely at the academy or educational system that contributed to Eben's foolishness. Eben himself, however, is at least presented ambivalently, if not quite sympathetically, in the second chapter of the novel where we learn of his childhood and education. Eben is raised alongside his twin sister Anna, and their father Andrew Cooke hires the young tutor Henry Burlingame III to teach both children—who are “lively, intelligent, and well-behaved,” as well as “great readers” of the classics, with dedicated imaginations—subjects as diverse as dancing, music, composition, and natural philosophy (5-7). While not necessarily idyllic, there is a sense of happiness here that is untampered by critique or even humor. Barth plays this portion of the novel largely straight, and when he writes that “Ebenezer and Anna loved their teacher, and the three were great companions” we are inclined to believe him (7). This short chapter, however, quickly abandons this peaceful childhood setting.

Within several pages, Eben is eighteen and sent away to Magdalene College for an education. Before he departs, Burlingame is dismissed for reasons which Andrew refuses to disclose. During his second year at college, Eben is bitten “by the muse’s gadfly” and begins to become a poet to the detriment of his well-being (9). The chapter concludes with the indecisive Eben, head in the clouds, educated just enough to be dangerous (as the old adage suggests), sitting in his window seat. Unable to eat or even dress himself, he “sat immobile . . . in his nightshirt and stared at the activity in the street below, unable to choose a motion at all even when, some hours later, his untutored bladder suggested one” (11). The “untutored bladder” (as blatant a pun as ever was writ) is the punchline to Eben’s backstory, but it also establishes a precedent for the manner in which Eben’s interactions with other such base, earthy concerns as eating, hygiene, and voiding waste will play out. Eben is concerned with higher matters, only to have a very lowly-situated, bodily force make a mockery of his poise. Barth uses the incongruity of Eben’s growing idealism positioned in opposition to a very unidealistic world (read: a world that falls short of the ideal—a world that rejects the notion of the ideal, in fact) to great humorous effect but also to critique our desire to sanitize history. He also uses these situations where Eben is humiliated by less idealistic forces to critique the academic establishment in ways that may verge on “self-parody,” however, when Joseph uses this term, he is likely referring to Barth’s metafictionalist tendencies to parody existing texts (including his own)—“to create original works of art out of the certainty that at this late date in the history of the Western narrative, it is impossible to write original narratives” (30). Conversely, I think that there is another type of self-parody at work in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Namely, Barth seems very self-aware of his position, which is not all that different from Eben’s: He is an artist of a sort working primarily within an academic setting.

Barth's depiction of Eben in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a somewhat self-parodic image. His mockery of Eben's ineptness becomes a "what if" scenario, in a sense, through which Barth considers what an artist who spent all his time in the academy without the social aspect or contact with the real world might turn out like, as "[i]t's queer for a live human animal, endowed with intelligence, to spend most waking hours of a very mortal life cooped up in a room not talking to anybody, just scribbling words on a page" (Gado, "John Barth" 126). In the Gado interview, Barth notes that money has never been the motivating factor behind his work because of his job as a professor. Barth says, "My first novels were financial losers. . . . But all I need from the books is to break even. I'm certainly not getting rich off writing, but I enjoy the freedom to follow purely aesthetic leanings [because of the separate income from teaching]" (125). He has never been a starving artist, as, artistry aside, his work at the university has provided him with sustenance. On that note, some critics argue that Barth's work "is too academic, too university-oriented" (Fogel and Slethaug 16); however, as with every other statement made about Barth, his humor, and the possibility of social critique in his work, there are critics who argue for the converse. Tobin, for example, characterizes his tone as "affectionate and playful, but finally just plain casual" ("Introduction: Creative Revisionism as Career" 8). Also, Barth seems conscious of the possibility suggested by his critics, and in the Gado interview, for instance, he directly addresses the criticism that has been leveled against him and other "profess-writer" types for working and living in the insulated university space, though Barth notes that there has been less of that recently "because the campuses are right in the center of what's happening in our society" (125). Furthermore, Barth says, "I would go absolutely crackers if I hadn't some congress with the world. I know I'm timid enough to require an official access to other people, such as a

university provides. I know this from the years I've spent in Europe or on leave in America trying to write: I got bored as hell with the vocation and the loneliness of not being in human company" (127). The university for Barth is not a retreat from the humanistic outside world (though it does provide him with a salary); instead, for Barth, the university *is* his access to society—to the world of interaction that exists outside the strictly academic.

One of the most evocative examples of Barth's satiric critique of Eben's status as poet *and* scholar occurs in part two of the novel (Chapter Eight: "The Laureate Indites a Quatrain and Fouls His Breeches") after Eben has secured his position as potential Laureate of the Maryland colony from Baltimore/Burlingame, and has reunited with his former tutor who has briefly adopted the identity of Colonel Peter Sayer and subsequently revealed himself and shared the story of his search for his parentage during the journey over land to Plymouth: the duo's point for departure for America. Arriving at the King o' the Seas tavern, Burlingame resolves that they should travel in disguise to elude minions in the employ of Coode. Burlingame and Eben briefly separate while the former partakes of the amorous affections of a barmaid. During this interval, Eben begins to write his "*Marylandiad*" but is interrupted by the pirate captains Scurry and Slye who are looking for the Laureate under Coode's orders. They fail to recognize Eben, but he bumbles his way into their conversation and is nearly shot by both of them before they are distracted by someone who looks like the Laureate outside. Eben passes out and regains consciousness in the stables, where he subsequently finds that he has soiled himself.

Nearly all this action is played for laughs, of course, and Burlingame, taking the part of the straight man when Eben awakes to his beshitten state, kindly takes the blame: "The fault is mine, Eben; had I known aught of your urgency I'd not have lingered such a time in

yonder privy. How is't you did not use this hay instead? 'Tis no mean second" (170). The understatement makes this sentiment which is played straight, without comment from Barth's narrator, humorous enough, but the real comedic meat of this setup occurs when Eben is required to deal with his mess. Burlingame's friendly barmaid offers to clean the poet's fouled drawers and breeches while the tutor fetches a fresh pair. When Eben queries his friend as to the means he should employ to further clean himself bodily while he waits, Burlingame simply shrugs and offers, straight-faced, "Only look about, good sir. *A clever man is never lost for long*" (172). Eben immediately rejects the straw all around him as impractical (difficult to "[clench] in the hand with comfort"), and he further realizes that he is bereft of the handkerchief in his pants pocket—but then, on second thought, the poet decides, "'Tis as well . . . for it hath a murtherous row of great French buttons" (172). Lest this entire chapter become a summary of a situation as humorous as it is unsavory, I will speed things up: In detailed fashion, Barth has Eben consider every possible piece of cloth in his possession (coat, shirt, and stockings) before turning to the tail of a nearby horse ("at once inaccessible and dangerous") and finally to his education "for succor," declaring, "If native wit can't save me, then education shall!" (172). What follows is a rumination on subjects many and varied, ranging from the lessons of history (Herodotus, Polybius, Sallust, and others) to Rabelais's *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* and More's *eternal spissitude*, without finding in them "precedent for his present plight" (172), before he finally remembers his poet's notebook (actually a ledger stolen from the bookseller by accident) and tears forth "two fresh and virgin sheets—and then two more—for the work, which, completed with no small labor, owing to the drying effect of the breeze, he turned into an allegory . . ." (174). That Eben turns to allegory to versify the wiping of his bum is indicative of his mindset.

Rather than learning from his experience what is clear to the reader—that for all his poeticism and his scholarship he is unable to effectively decide how to clean himself—he instead turns again to an idealistic epistemology ill-suited to his situation.

If one employs Raskin and Attardo's GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humor) structure to examine this extended scene in the stables, one can draw the following conclusions: first, the script opposition (SO) in this scenario would involve the likely expectations of the reader who might not be anticipating such a scene in the first place, or who might at least not be expecting it to go on for so long or in such exhaustive, sometimes graphic, detail. Second, the target of the joke (TA) is Eben as well as the sort of poeticism or scholasticism divorced from an understanding of the real world that I described previously. Third, the only logical mechanism (LM) capable of resolving the joke (of putting an end to the situation) is time, and Barth could have conceivably run on for far longer than he does by having Eben probe still further depths of his knowledge. Fourth, the situation of the joke (SI), which has been covered in some detail already, enhances the humorous effect because the stable bereft of workable options for cleaning one's backside offers only the ludicrous and/or disgusting (possibly straw, one's own coat, or a horse's tale), and the comedy comes as much from the awkwardness of the images Barth invokes as it does from the clever ways in which Eben tries to reason his way out of the mess. Fifth, the language (LA) of the novel is still that of the eighteenth century (formal, heightened) but deployed to describe such sordid details as the effects of a drying breeze... Sixth, the narrative strategy (NS) Barth employs here is similar to the one used to introduce Cooke in the first place, as it proves both exhaustive and *exhausting* as the reader stays by Eben's side moment-to-moment while he ponders his predicament and consistently provides new, fresh imagery to consider. Chiefly, the humorous

effect depends upon the discomfort produced by the imagery of the drying breeze and the sorts of scenarios which are evoked by contemplating the task of cleaning one's backside with straw. Eben's role of self-styled poet and sometimes-scholar is juxtaposed with a dirty behind and the workaday task of cleaning it—a task to which he proves nearly unequal and which, at least in the reader's eyes, must undermine the sort of idealism Eben represents.

Further, when he attempts to appear learned through the recitation of assorted aphorisms at various points in the novel, Eben only makes a greater fool of himself. For example, he employs at several points the lewd saying "There are more ways to the woods than one," which refers to anal sex, in situations where (obviously) it has no relevance. In this same manner, Eben manages to insult Lord Baltimore/Burlingame during their meeting when he replies to his soon-to-be patron's aphorisms—"*A king's favor is no inheritance; and A king promiseth all, and observeth what he will*"—with a saying inappropriate to the situation which aligns him with the king in the dispute over the Maryland territory: "*He who eats the King's goose shall choke on the feathers*" (Barth 91). When Baltimore/Burlingame responds in anger, Eben nervously replies with three more such sayings in quick succession until Baltimore/Burlingame begs him to stop. This scene drives home the folly with which Eben conducts himself as a scholar and gentleman. The entire exchange between the two is played for laughs, as Baltimore/Burlingame relates the history of Maryland while Eben exclaims over each fresh revelation, offering what can easily be read as an exaggerated performance of interest when he shouts "'Tis too much!" and "Thank Heav'n! . . . *All's well that ends well!*"—to which the disguised Burlingame offers rejoinders that lightly mock the poet's excitement: "'Tis plain truth" and "And ill as ends ill," for instance. As with the aphorism about anal sex, Ebenezer's excessive reliance on and occasional misuse of similar

sayings becomes a running gag throughout the book. While many characters like Eben's bawdy manservant Bertrand take these slips more or less in stride, others—like Baltimore/Burlingame and the pimp John McEvoy—openly challenge Eben's misconceived worldview and lofty opinion of himself, his knowledge, and his virtue when he expresses them without considering their implications.

Eben first interacts with the pimp McEvoy after agreeing to purchase the services of Joan Toast, only to spend the time learning of Joan's history of sexual abuse at the hands of a lecherous uncle and his "Great Tom Leech." Eben and Joan do not have sex, and instead spend their time together discussing the nature of men and women. The poet ultimately falls in love with her, refuses to pay her fee, and elicits a threat from the spurned prostitute to call down the wrath of her pimp as she curses Eben before storming out, "I've mother wit enough to see when I'm hoaxed and cheated. . . . May ye suffer French pox, ye great ass!" (59). Joan's coarse nature stands out in sharp contrast to the poem Eben composes in her honor, styled after the classics and featuring allusions to Troy, Ulysses, Penelope, Endymion, Phaedra, and the like. In short, Eben is once again creating a foolish spectacle by attempting to apply his lofty ideals of the artist (and "*Virgin*, sir!") to a situation where they are inappropriate. The incongruous pairing of the (ostensible) high arts with the low inspiration of a prostitute sets the tone for the meeting with McEvoy which follows. Like Bertrand, McEvoy is a man of the world who finds Eben's preoccupation with virtue and poetics baffling. Like Joan, McEvoy is a roughly-spoken character with a dialect that does not suggest refinement. Upon entering Eben's room, McEvoy accosts the wannabe poet and demands his fee. When Eben denies owing McEvoy anything, the pimp replies, not inarticulately, "[T]he first principle o' harlotry is, that what a man buys of a whore is not so

much her bum but her will and her time; when ye hire my Joan 'tis neither her affair nor mine what use ye make o' her, so long as ye pay yer fee. As't happens, ye chose to talk in lieu of swiving . . ." (61). When Eben remains obstinate, McEvoy produces a letter addressed to the poet and virgin's father informing him that his son is making no attempt to advance in his career and is further slandering the good name of the family "spending his days and nights in the wine- and coffee-houses and the theaters, drinking, whoring, writing doggerel" (62).

McEvoy's thick brogue, which is quite evident in the previous quote, coupled with his career as a pimp and thug creates the expectation that his writing will offer more of the same brutishness; however, the blackmail letter Eben reads reveals the opposite to be the case. Eben is the target of the joke here—or, alternatively, his and the reader's expectations regarding McEvoy are targeted—when much of the letter is quoted to the reader in the text, thus providing a stark contrast between McEvoy's "naught o' life" and "ye's" and "'twere's" and the language he uses to address Eben's father, which is formal in the extreme. Rather than identifying himself as a "pimp" and Joan Toast as his "whore," he describes their professions in the highest of terms that, again, contrast sharply with the reader's expectations for the pair: Joan is a "young woman" Eben has "[lured] . . . into his bedchamber on the promise of generous remuneration" (which he has subsequently refused on the grounds of love), while McEvoy is simply an "agent for one such defrauded young lady" and "Mr. Cooke's creditor in the amount of five guineas" (63). The reader does not have to labor to resolve the script opposition presented by McEvoy's speech and his written manner. The contrast is easy to appreciate, and the fact that the situation in which the narrative places Eben during this exchange, effectively confined to bed because (we learn after McEvoy's

departure) “any strong emotion tended to soak him in sweat, to rob him of muscle if not voice, and to make him sick” (64). This revelation adds further humor to the exchange between Eben and McEvoy because of the positioning of the characters (the former in bed and the latter standing beside) as the two debate the meaning of the aforementioned five guineas Eben owes for Joan.

Because he did not “swive” her (and, in fact, now loves her and has immortalized her in verse), Eben insists that he will not make a whore of Joan by paying the fee:

“My dear man,” Ebenezer smiled, “will you not take five—nay, *six* guineas from me as an outright gift?”

“Five guineas, as a fee,” repeated McEvoy.

“Where’s the difference to you, should I call the sum a gift and not a payment? ’Twill fetch no less in the market, I pledge you!”

“If’t makes no difference,” replied McEvoy, “then call it the fee for Joan Toast’s whoring.” (61)

As with the sequence where Eben fouls his pants and turns to scholarship to save him from an earthly predicament, the humor of this exchange between the poet and the pimp—debating the significance of “fee” versus “gift” and the ideal of love for Joan Toast Eben idolizes versus the reality McEvoy lives with every day—results from the fact that such thoroughly secular matters are being debated with regard to their semantics. The situation, the participants, their language, and the subject matter all contribute to a scene that is as philosophically relevant to Barth’s treatment of history (more on that in a moment) as it is ridiculous to conceptualize as a meeting of various incongruities. The fact that this chapter

also bears the title “A Colloquy Between Men of Principle, and What Came of It” only further enhances the comedy of the situation—the term “colloquy” hardly seems appropriate for a discussion between two men over the nature of prostitution, while these same men are “Men of Principle” only in the most literal sense of the term: They both have their scruples and refuse to budge in their assurance; “principle” in the elevated, virtuous sense is made a mockery of here.

Barth generally attends to the movement of Eben Cooke through the novel with “comic seriousness” (76), striving as he (Eben) does to “personify innocence” despite the certainty of his eventual fall (Morrell, “Ebenezer Cooke, Virgin, Poet, and Laureate” 49). Likewise, “[p]ure’ history,” write Fogel and Slethaug, “is [also] impossible. Ebenezer’s own purity, his own virginity, which is comically and extravagantly held until the novel’s closing scenes, is finally surrendered to the syphilitic Joan Toast. Neither Ebenezer nor history can survive unscathed . . .” (“*The Sot-Weed Factor*” 78). While Eben provides the perspective from which the story is told, “[r]eading the world continuously, seamlessly or, indeed, in any interpretable manner at all via history is what Barth attempts to subvert here,” and “stories that are legitimized as history, as well as the theories of histories themselves, are reevaluated in *The Sot-Weed Factor* . . .” (78).

If we read *The Sot-Weed Factor* as either a satiric *Bildungsroman* or *Künstlerroman* that deals with Eben’s growth as a character and his awakening as an artist, then there are several different ways in which one can also interpret his development. As Morrell observes, “Eben’s journey from London to Cooke’s point is, after all, more than physical. It is a moral, political, and philosophical progress as well” (“Ebenezer Cooke, Virgin, Poet, and Laureate” 49). Like Barth’s readers, Eben comes to appreciate the unsavory elements of history (his

present in the novel) when he shifts his focus from the initial goal of trying “to force reality to measure up to his expectations”—to “fragmentary codes of idealism that he has learned from men preaching anything but what they practiced”—to survival in a New World very different from what he expected (Tharpe 38). Eben’s idealized visions of Maryland and of himself parallel in a sense the sanitized history which *The Sot-Weed Factor* satirizes. Yet, as characters like McEvoy suggest, there is nothing inherently ignoble about living in seemingly immoral times and sometimes committing immoral acts. Rather, the sin is in the pretense, of claiming or espousing a virtue that does not actually exist.

To connect this line of reasoning about the novel to nationalistic practices of whitewashing history, Lewis writes that some “would rather rewrite history not as it was, or as they have been taught that it was, but as they would prefer it to have been. . . . Their aim is to amend, to restate, or replace, or even to recreate the past in a more satisfactory form” (55). As I previously mentioned in the introduction, Lewis makes the argument that this revision of history often serves the purpose of adding nobility to ignoble or otherwise unpalatable truths. For example:

[T]he American opening of the West and conquest of the Indian have been . . . celebrated in legend and balladry, in the whole neo-epical and pseudo-epical cycles of cowboy and Indian stories, in song and verse, fiction and film. Through these, as well as through schoolbooks and children’s literature, they occupy a place in American corporate self-awareness comparable with the heroic memories of Greece and the imperial consciousness of Rome. (57)

In much the same way that Eben Cooke attempts to associate the earthy experiences of prostitution and of his disappointingly “beshitten” experiences in the colonies with an epic

Greek and Roman past, to the delight of the reader who can see the foolishness of this venture (the way that Eben begins to compose his account of the crossing of the Atlantic before he has even boarded a ship, for instance), American attempts to create “neo-epical” mythic histories like the one described by Lewis above can and should be read as equally ludicrous. Barth closely associates Eben’s general clumsiness, his naiveté, and his poetic aspirations that mark him as markedly unfamiliar with the workings of the real world with a literary project (the so-called “*Marylandiad*”) that is analogous to the process of revising history “to embellish—to correct or remove what is distasteful in the past, and replace it with something more acceptable, more encouraging and more conducive to the purpose in hand” (56-57). At the risk of this discussion simply becoming a diatribe about nationalism dealing exclusively in generalities, though, it is worth noting, as Lewis does, that “[o]f late there has been some revulsion from the traditional self-congratulatory view of the conquest of the American West” (57); furthermore, and more broadly-speaking, it is worth reiterating the notion advanced by Wood that the previous few decades have seen the dissolution of these notions of a mythic, shared American history, at least at the academic level, where various parties advocate alternatively “a return to narrative, to the kind of storytelling that, presumably, history was always noted for” (the “traditional grand narrative”) and further fragmentation of the discipline marked by the continued breaking down of these formerly recognized universal narratives (4).

Under postmodernism, theorizes Linda Hutcheon, there has been a grounding of “both history and literature as human constructs, indeed, as human illusions. . . . [T]he conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed, subverted, asserted, and denied” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 4-5). This movement is

apparent in the work of authors like Barth, Toni Morrison, E. L. Doctorow, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas Pynchon (5)—authors of well-known popular novels that have also attained recognition by the canon. Barth in particular, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, “endlessly invokes the authority of history only to nullify that authority by exposing it as merely another version of an unfathomable truth” (Aldridge, “The Novel as Narcissus” 124). Lest one still imagine that this changing perception of history and its affirming qualities is confined to the academy, though, I would also point to elements of popular culture in which similar ideas seem to be circulating and that have attracted a public following, like in Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, an elaborate critique of conservative, patriotic (nationalistic) aspects of American culture. Barth identifies an ubiquitous “apocalyptic feeling that we all have about America at the moment” which he claims, in the Gado interview, actually enhanced his pleasure of studying the colonial period (“John Barth” 118). “Apocalyptic” is the term I want to focus on here, but before discussing it, I believe I should take a moment to delineate the actual definition of the term from its popular connotation. Although the term has assumed a certain meaning in the popular consciousness that associates it with massive destruction (often nuclear), another, older definition refers to a “revelation” (realization or epiphany)—initially Biblical, referring to “[t]he ‘revelation’ of the future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos,” the term now means, by extension, “[a]ny revelation or disclosure” (“Apocalypse”); therefore, when we discuss an “apocalyptic feeling” concerning America, we are not necessarily dealing with a popular apocalypse (read: mass destruction or dissolution of the country), though there may be elements of both definitions of the term in Barth’s usage of it.

There is certainly room to interpret “apocalyptic”/revelatory thinking about America in different ways—Are we at risk of losing our position as a global superpower? Are we in

danger of being first economically and then culturally sublimated by a rising nation (like China), thus eliminating our “way of life”?—but one way to read Barth’s use of the term is in the aforementioned critical capacity like that employed by Colbert. Thus the question becomes, Are we as a culture becoming more critical of affirming historical narratives of American transcendence? If so (if this is the apocalyptic mindset to which Barth refers), then it is clear that the critical eye to history is not confined to academe and is instead a part of the larger public consciousness. Barth is “curious about the apocalyptic ambience in which we live. . . .” (Gado, “John Barth” 137), and at the time of *The Sot-Weed Factor*’s composition, he “had feelings about America” that he likens to the nostalgic longing of Virgil for the vanished marshes of Rome (118). It is interesting that Barth makes this classic/mythic association between America and Rome, which is similar to what Eben does in the novel—and for which he is continually mocked for by the other characters and, by extension, by Barth himself. Again, this connection that Barth makes between himself and Eben suggests a certain self-aware and self-deprecating humor on Barth’s part, as he critiques just such a mythic appreciation of history and the country in *The Sot-Weed Factor* by way of Eben Cooke even as he himself experiences similar feelings in the real world.

Like the false sanitized history he admires, Eben holds his virtue dearer than it deserves, and his insistence on being a gentleman, scholar, and artist according to lofty standards only results in his humiliation. A sanitized, idealistic history, like Eben’s “vision” of Joan as someone other than who she is—a figure to be immortalized in verse amongst mythic figures instead of, as McEvoy aptly puts it, a woman of “mortal clay [who] hath her share o’ failings like the rest of us” (62)—can be nothing more than just that: a vision or a dream that is itself the true love rather than the actual person (or past). Eben’s love for and

vision of Joan, according to McEvoy, are not true: "'tis your *love* ye love," says the wise pimp; "'tis the vision ye love, not the woman" (62). Humorous as the scene between Eben and McEvoy can be (and is) for the way that it establishes a contrast between the latter's rough exterior and his ability to understand the way that the world works in a manner that the former still cannot appreciate, it also makes a telling point about the nature of truth, reality, and history. History may be a pimp or a prostitute, but that does not mean that its character needs to be hidden. Rather, from pimps and prostitutes can come meaningful revelations about human relationships and even art. Before leaving Eben to mail his letter of blackmail, McEvoy catches sight of the poet's piece composed for Joan and remarks upon the slant rhyme of "*Endymion*" and "*Step-Son*," offering a wry piece of advice that strikes a comedic note in its straightforward yet playful disregard for the supposed-artist's attempt at mythic allusion: "Marry, sir, . . . Were I in your boots I'd pay my whore-money and consign letter, *Endymion*, *Step-Son*, and all to the fire" (63). Barth's protagonist's eventual realization of the truth of things—his own mortal status in a world unfit for an epic portrayal—corresponds to the reader's own. That Eben and the treatment of history in *The Sot-Weed Factor* should be closely tied makes sense given that Fogel and Slethaug identify them as "the two main concerns of the novel" (80).

The fact that Eben becomes a symbol for the reader, scholar, or nation with a misplaced reverence for a sanitized history may seem problematic at first given the way that Barth describes him as a child. Although both Eben and Anna are "rapid learners" when faced with natural philosophy, literature, composition, and music, they are weaker in the fields of languages, mathematics, and, yes, history (Barth 7). That being said, young Eben seems like the perfect skeptic to *doubt* the very myths he later idolizes. For example:

“[T]hough the whole business of Greece and Rome were unquestionably delightful, he found the notion preposterous, almost unthinkable, that this was the *only* way it happened: that made him nervous and irritable when he thought of it at all” (8). Again, we find Greece and Rome playing a role in the discussion of the past, but the problem with Eben’s conception of history here—and what makes him fall for visions over reality—is how “[t]he sum of history became in his head no more than the stuff of metaphors” (10). On the one hand, Eben possesses a certain skepticism about history, but, on the other, he has lost touch with *any* reality (historical or otherwise) in this early section of the novel.

Eben is more concerned with “metaphors” and poetry than he is with “the philosophers of his era. . . . [or with] its theologians” (10). Eben is thrilled at the prospect of anything and everything, and “he was moved to ready admiration by expert falconers, scholars, masons, chimney-sweeps, prostitutes, admirals, cutpurses, sailmakers, barmaids, apothecaries, and cannoneers alike” (9); consequently, he can also take “quite the same sort of pleasure in history as in Greek mythology and epic poetry, and made little or no distinction between, say, the geography of the atlases and that of fairy-stories. . . . [H]e could not regard the facts of zoology or the Norman Conquest, for example, with genuine seriousness” (8). Eben’s skepticism about the past amounts to nothing because he equates all history with fairy tale, and his excitement for each subject is filtered through his poeticism, which reduces all and sundry to “metaphor”:

[H]is great imagination and enthusiasm for the world were not unalloyed virtues when combined with his gay irresolution, for though they led him to a great sense of the arbitrariness of the particular real world, they did not endow him with a corresponding realization of its finality. He very well knew, for

instance, that ‘France is shaped like a teapot,’ but he could scarcely accept the fact that there was actually in existence *at that instant* such a place as France, where people were speaking French and eating snails whether he thought about them or not, and that despite the virtual infinitude of imaginable shapes, this France would have to go on resembling a teapot forever. (8)

We see evidence, once again, that Eben is out of touch with reality because he sees reality as mythic and shapeable as poetry. As such, while he has his doubts about absolutes like history, he also cannot accept the reality out of which history is shaped, and thus he worships mythic principles like virtue and attributes a similar level of sanctity to scholarly knowledge in general—hence his attempts described earlier in this paper to apply the knowledge of the academy to the workaday process of cleaning himself.

Barth lays the blame for Eben’s lack of worldly experience at the feet of the “goggling scarecrow” himself—since his inherent “imaginativeness” influences his worldview—but he also suggests that the education the young poet receives from Burlingame is partly to blame, “for though a good teacher will teach well regardless of the theory he suffers from, and though Burlingame’s might seem to have been an unusually attractive one, yet there is no perfect educational method . . .” (8); furthermore, had Burlingame been able to complete Eben’s education (had Andrew not dismissed him because of his romance with Anna), “[p]erhaps with continued guidance from his tutor he [Eben] could in time have overcome these failings . . .” (9). As it is, the self-proclaimed Laureate and virgin does not come to an understanding of the nature of the world around him (a nature he himself shares) until the book’s final chapter, when the secret of the eggplant ritual—which John Smith used to take Pocahontas’s virtue and which Burlingame requires in order to consummate his

relationship with Anna—is uncovered in a fragment of the elder Henry Burlingame’s journal which ends with two exhortations to the reader: first, that “it is still pleasing to a Christian man, to suffer him selfe the studie of wickednesse, that he may content him self (without sinfull pride) upon the contrast thereof with his owne rectitude”; and second (and more importantly) “that true virtue lieth not in innocence, but in full knowledge of the Devils subtile arts...” (738).

The first of the journal’s lessons has been Eben’s *raison d’être*, or at least his rationale for his behavior and beliefs, thus far—his mythic/poetic worldview and his obsession with virtue has enabled him to react with shock to the stories of espionage and double-crosses related by Baltimore/Burlingame, and to the sexual exploits of Joan Toast, Bertrand, and the bisexual Burlingame who admits his attraction to both Eben and his twin sister. The second, though, enables Eben to finally recognize his need for “atonement . . . for [his] sins against the girl [Joan], against [his] father, against Anna . . .” (739). His infatuation with innocence (in himself, in the world, in history), Eben realizes, has been his crime: “the crime of innocence, whereof the Knowledged must bear the burthen. There’s the true Original Sin our souls are born in: not that Adam *learned*, but that he *had* to learn—in short, that he was innocent” (279). The fall is a fortunate one; one gains knowledge not only of the true nature of innocence but also of evil (“the Devils subtile arts”) and is no less virtuous for it. Eben’s relationship with Joan further symbolizes this revelation.

The diseased Joan Toast owns Malden, and though she is soon to die, the property can only pass to her husband Eben if the two consummate their union. Andrew warns Eben that Joan has “the social malady” (read: syphilis); however, Burlingame insists that Eben proceed: “Ye’ll take her pox, Eben, but ye’ll not die of’t, methinks; belike ’tis a mere

dev'lish clap and not the French disease" (739). Just as encountering the world as it is will not make Eben less virtuous, so will his brush with literal disease, at least according to the worldly Burlingame, leave him marked but alive, though the former tutor does jokingly exclaim moments later, "See to what lengths the fallen go, to increase their number!" (740). Burlingame's customary jocularity aside, here we find Eben at last making peace with the fact that he is only human, that virtue has its place but does not deserve the devotion Eben has hitherto offered it, that loving Joan as a woman (with flaws) is as possible (if not more so) than loving her as a figure in a poem, and, by extension, that the reality of the world and life on it is worth knowing, warts and all—the present, but also the past, ought to be encountered as it is, sans artifice.

Elaine Safer's reading of *The Sot-Weed Factor*'s message echoes my own from the preceding paragraphs in some ways. She agrees that "Barth forces his reader to confront . . . his nostalgia for a legendary past. . . ." as I do, particularly through his twisting of stories such as that of John Smith and Pocahontas which have "become mythical for Americans" ("The Allusive Mode" 426); and yet, Safer goes further still to suggest that one of Barth's goals is to force readers to face the reality of a meaningless universe. This claim makes sense within the larger context of *The Sot-Weed Factor*'s status as the third book in Barth's so-called nihilism trilogy, but I disagree with Safer's assertion that the goal of the novel is to expose the meaninglessness of the universe (or even just of history). It is true that "Barth makes fun of the reader's nostalgia for American history, by depicting the New World's first settlers as gamblers and debauchers instead of saintly heroes" and that he "burlesques" Smith and Pocahontas by rendering both as sexually-voracious rather than the princess as an "innocent [motivated by] love for the grand hero" (*The Contemporary American Comic Epic*

29); however, as I have already established, I do not see his humor as that of the absurd. Safer suggests that Barth, along with other postmodernists, uses the humor of the absurd instead of the “traditional” mode (23). This is not the case, though. Absurd humor (also known as nonsense humor), after all, requires an unresolvable oppositional script (or simply a ridiculous situation which makes no sense), whereas the humor of *The Sot-Weed Factor* often presents incongruities that *are* resolvable and can be explicated using structures like the GTVH. Ultimately, this is only a quibble. Barth certainly uses humor—“parody,” “satire,” and “black humor” are all applied to his work by Safer as well—and he uses it in this novel quite explicitly for the purpose of exposing “false ordering systems” like history *can* be (24). I do not think Barth dislikes history in general, either as a subject or as a concept. Rather, his novel is geared toward exposing the exploitation of meaning (and history) by those with personal, ideological, or political motivations.

The first line of the first chapter of *The Sot-Weed Factor* clearly sets the book in history and creates a connection between the time period and Eben: “IN THE LAST YEARS of the Seventeenth Century there was to be found among the fops and fools of the London coffee-houses one rangy, gangling flitch called Ebenezer Cooke” (3). Barth uses the term “history” over eighty times in the novel—nearly one hundred times if one includes instances of “historie” in reference to John Smith’s secret journals.³ The usage of the term varies. Sometimes Eben and company are referring to “history” in the sense that I have used it here (referring to the collective past); but it also appears in book titles and as a synonym for a personal past—Burlingame tries to discover his parentage and, thereby, his “history,” for instance. To reiterate a previous point, Eben’s understanding of history is tied up with his poetic vision and insistence upon certain mythic qualities of the past and present, qualities

that could very well inform a nationalistic view of history. Lewis notes, “Another function of the past is to legitimize authority” (60). Eben becomes involved in a similar revision of history when he pitches his “*Marylandiad*” to Baltimore/Burlingame, and his arguments for the necessity of such a poem conflate the work of the poet and historian, calling back to his understanding of the real world (and history) through myth:

“[W]ould the world at large know aught of Agamemnon, or fierce Achilles, or crafty Odysseus, or the cuckold Menelaus, or that entire circus of strutting Greeks and Trojans, had not great Homer rendered ’em to verse? How many battles of greater importance are lost in the dust of history, d’you think, for want of a poet to sing ’em to the ages? Full many a Helen blooms one spring and goes to the worm forgot; but let a Homer paint her in the grand cosmetic of his verse, and her beauty boils the blood of twenty centuries! . . . I say ’tis not in the deeds [their] greatness lies, but in their telling. And who’s to tell ’em? Not the historian, for be he ne’er so devilish accurate . . . yet nobody reads him but his fellow chronicles and his students. . . . But place deeds and doer in the poet’s hands, and what comes of’t? Lo, the crook’d nose grows straight, the lean shank fleshes out, French pox becomes a bedsore; shady deeds shed their tarnish, bright grow brighter. . . .”

“’Tis clear as day,” said Charles with a smile, “that the poet is a useful member of a Prince’s train.” (74)

There is a lot to unpack here, obviously, that relates to Eben’s understanding of the relationship between poeticism and history and to our own discussion of history and nationalism. First, as previously mentioned, this scene is played for humor because of the

ways that Eben and Baltimore/Burlingame interact, but an additional layer of comedy is added when one considers the position of the twentieth (or twenty-first) century reader perusing this sequence. That Eben conflates history and myth—that he still believes in the existence of Achilles, Helen, Odysseus, etc. and in the possibility of “Homer” having been a single artist—may just reflect upon the times in which he lived, but it also casts him, personally, as a bit of a naïve fool (as previously established). Eben is enough of a schemer to put together this meeting with Baltimore in the first place for the express purpose of making his lot in the New World easier than it might otherwise have been—remember that in terms of the novel’s own plot and chronology, Eben’s inactivity and less than industrious behavior has been exposed to his father by way of the pimp McEvoy; Eben’s father, in response, has directed his son to set sail at once for Maryland to learn a useful trade at the family plantation at Malden; therefore, Eben arranges this meeting for the sole purpose of giving himself a way out of the hard work ahead of him.

These machinations aside, Eben still seems quite convinced of the character of the place to which he will be sailing. When Baltimore/Burlingame informs him “that virgins are rare as poets” in Maryland, Eben insists otherwise—part of this insistence on the feasibility of the “*Marylandiad*” is informed by his desire to get away with his plan, but one also knows by way of precedent, including the scene with Joan Toast and the matter of Eben’s refusing to pay her as a prostitute, that there is genuine naiveté in Eben and that he believes in the possibility of a world that can deserve a treatment like those created by Homer. The fact that Eben still has these beliefs about the potential existence of a mythic past (or present) seems completely at odds with the fact that, as he points out in his “pitch” to Baltimore/Burlingame, the poet’s depiction of reality is not accurate: “Lo, the crook’d nose grows straight,” etc.

(74). He even seems somewhat aware of the propagandistic advantage of crafting such an affirming, sanitized history. It will, he claims, “stick in the head like *Greensleeves* and move the heart like Scripture!” (74). Given the fact that scripture is a guiding influence in the lives of many, Eben’s decision to draw an explicit connection between it and an altered history suggests the power such a “musicked” account might hold—as Baltimore/Burlingame slyly notes, after all, a poet such as Eben describes would be useful to a prince (or other leader).

For Baltimore/Burlingame specifically, Eben’s poem would give him a chance to be rid of the wheelings and dealings and backstabs associated with the province. He tells Eben, “[H]ie you to Maryland; *put her history out of mind* and look you at her peerless virtues. Study them; mark them well! Then, if you can, turn what you see to verse. . . . Rhyme me such a rhyme, Eben Cooke; make me this Maryland, that neither time nor intrigue can rob me of . . .” (92, emphasis added). In short, Baltimore/Burlingame instructs Eben to disregard the truth of the situation and craft a picture of Maryland like those Eben has alluded to from Greece and Rome. Once again, though, Eben makes his pitch about purposefully eliding certain unsavory details concerning the past and present of Maryland but does not seem to appreciate that the very pieces about Greek and Rome which he prizes as historical would be fabrications themselves, thus undermining the worldview that he holds and which makes him at once feel so sanctified while remaining so comically out of touch with the real world. He is complicit in creating something akin to a nationalistic revision of history—something which, as Lewis observes, is “usually of little value to the historian . . .” (64): a profession Eben derides in his pitch to Baltimore/Burlingame for its focus on the facts and accuracy; but it is still history Eben turns to first when he is trying to figure out how to clean himself up in the tavern stable. At first, he reasons, “Why should men prize the records of the past . . . save as

lessons for the present?"; however, he concludes that "'Tis clear . . . that History teacheth not a man, but mankind; her muse's pupil is the body politic or its leaders" (172). Here he has an inkling of history as the sort of propagandistic device which a prince might value. Eben is at once a character who rejects the notion of the historian but essentially takes on the mantle himself as a poet creating a fictionalized portrait of a time and place that will, according to his own thinking, pass into the future as history for coming generations like the works of Homer have been to him. He is aware yet also unaware of the ways in which his own ideologies interact with and contradict one another.

Chapter Three

The Sot-Weed Duo, American History and Identity

The nameless factor of Cooke's poem, who Barth transforms into the poet himself in his novel, possess a similar high-mindedness that is undercut at various points during his brief stay in Maryland. Upon his arrival in the colonies at the beginning of the poem, the factor establishes the New World as a land associated with Cain and populated by figures created "in jest" by nature. These first planters encountered by the factor are thus described in less than complimentary ways: "In hue as tawny as a Moor: / Figures so strange, no God design'd, / To be a part of Humane kind . . ." (3). These men and women, "[w]ith neither Stockings, Hat nor Shooe" live in a land "where no good Sense is found" (3, 4). The factor sets himself up early in the narrative as superior to the colonists, which is ironic given his own status as a fugitive of sorts and the fact that these selfsame colonists will later take him for everything he has and reduce him to a state of disgrace. Nonetheless, the nameless factor, much like Eben, tries to conduct his life with a certain dignity and gravitas, only to fail and look like a fool. For example, during a river crossing shortly after his arrival in Maryland, the factor must hitch a ride in a "shining odd invention" or "watry Waggon"—a "*Canoo*, a Vessel none can brag on; / Cut from a *Popular-Tree* or *Pine*, / And fashion'd like a Trough for Swine . . ." (4). In spite of the abuse he heaps on the "canoo" for its rustic appearance, the factor also tries to imbue it with a certain virtue during his crossing by dubbing it a "most noble Fishing-Boat" and by "boldly [putting] myself afloat" (4); however, the factor's attempts at cutting a noble figure aboard the canoe are undermined by his clear lack of

knowledge. Rather than sit normally, he “[stands] erect, with Legs stretch’d wide” (4). The image of a man standing boldly (of all things) in the middle of a canoe, with one foot on either side is immediately recognizable as ridiculous—even more so when one considers the fact that there are other people present, either paddling or looking on. There is a version of this scene in Barth’s novel, though Eben, astoundingly, has enough sense not to stand in the canoe. Although he displays more common sense here than his poetic counterpart, Eben by no means comes off quite heroically either. Still convinced of the authority of the post of Laureate, he offers to pay the ferryman with a sonnet, and although there is a slight jab at the colonist for accepting Eben’s assertions of the verse’s worth, he still has the last laugh by delivering Eben to the opposite shore and then leaving him with the knowledge that he is nowhere near the Choptank River and the Malden plantation he seeks (Barth 298). Eben’s somewhat patronizing treatment of the ferryman is echoed by the factor’s own attitude toward the Marylanders he encounters in the poem.

One such exchange occurs between the factor and the son of a planter who puts him up for the night when the two are on the road together and engage in a discussion of the origins of the Indians of America after encountering one. Quite sensibly, the planter’s son proposes that the Indians are descendants of “*Tartarians wild*” or “*Chinese from their Home exiled,*” who “Wandering thro’ Mountains hid with Snow / And Rills did in the Vallies flow / Far to the South of *Mexico*: / Broke thro’ the Barrs which Nature cast. . . .” to settle the country (Cooke 13). He is, essentially, close to describing the origin of Native Americans which is still ascribed to today: namely, that native peoples from Asia crossed the Bering Strait to reach the Americas. The planter’s son seems to conflate this group with the Indians of South America and Mexico who would have come northward, but the general thrust of his

suggestion could be considered factual. The factor, on the other hand, smiles at the youth's suggestion and then offers his own version of history. It is not possible that the Chinese could be the ancestors of the Indians, he argues, for "tho' a *Chinese* Host, / Might penetrate this *Indian* Coast, / Yet this was certainly most true, / They never cou'd the Isles subdue; / For knowing not to steer a Boat, / They could not on the Ocean float" (14). Instead, he argues, the original settlers of North America must have been Phoenicians, well known historical mariners. These Phoenicians, says the factor, must have colonized the area, but then "suffer'd Ship-wreck, or were drown'd," thus leaving the colonists stranded and cut off from their homeland (15). While not strictly mythic or legendary, the factor's belief that a group of people from the Mediterranean region crossed the Atlantic to settle the Americas is improbable, if not entirely impossible.

Another way in which Barth's Eben Cooke and the protagonist of the poem mirror one another humorously is in their unnecessary recourse to the use of their sword under circumstances a more level-headed person would have resolved peacefully. After surviving his first voyage in a "*Canoo*," the protagonist of the poem encounters a youth with a herd of cattle. When the factor tries to ask the youth where he can find a place to stay, however, "[t]he surley Peasant bid me stay, / And ask'd from whom I'de run away" (5). Cooke's protagonist's response to this perceived insult is swift and foolish—"I instantly lugg'd out my Sword" (5)—given that the source of his ire is only an unarmed peasant. The use of the term "lugg'd," suggesting that drawing the sword requires some kind of effort on the part of the factor (that it may, in fact, be too heavy for him to wield easily), makes the factor out to be a bumbler, as well as someone with an exceptionally thin skin. Unimpressed, the youth "mildly" answers the would-be assailant's assertions of his intentions and his place of origin

(“*Great-Britain*”). This is not the last time the factor employs his sword in the poem—nor is it the most excessive and comedic. While staying with the planter to whom the youth has directed him, the factor retires to his room to sleep, but his expectations of “golden Slumbers blest” are shattered by a row amongst the farm animals, in which the factor quickly becomes embroiled and, once again, turns to his sword to settle the matter:

But soon a noise disturb'd my quiet,
 And plagu'd me with nocturnal Riot;
 A Puss which in the ashes lay,
 With grunting Pig began a Fray;
 And prudent Dog, that feuds might cease,
 Most strongly bark'd to keep the Peace.
 This Quarrel scarcely was decided,
 By stick that ready lay provided;
 But *Reynard*, arch and cunning Loon,
 Broke into my Apartment soon:
 In hot pursuit of Ducks and Geese,
 With fell intent the same to seize:

 Raging I jump'd upon the Floar,
 And like a Drunken Saylor Swore;
 With Sword I fiercely laid about,
 And soon dispers'd the Feather'd Rout
 The Poultry out of Window flew,

And *Reynard* cautiously withdrew:
 The Dogs who this Encounter heard,
 Fiercely themselves to aid me rear'd,
 And to the Place of Combat run,
 Exactly as the Field was won.
 Fretting and hot as roasting Capon,
 And greasy as a Flich of Bacon;
 I to the Orchard did repair,
 To Breathe the cool and open Air. . . . (8-9)

Although it is unclear whether the factor is the one who employs the stick to break up the initial row between the pig and cat which sets off the dog, what happens when the fox and poultry burst into his room is what makes this such a darling bit of slapstick. The factor draws his sword (which makes one suspect that he is not the stick-wielder of the earlier line given his proclivity for employing steel in meting out justice) and sends poultry scrambling for the window and the fox into a cautious retreat... at which point the dogs arrive and effectively drive the factor himself out of the room and into the orchard.

Here, as in the earlier encounter with the youth, under Raskin and Attardo's GTVH the script opposition (SO) would be the factor's excessive show of force in the face of a situation that does not require it—the escalation of a simple verbal conflict or a row amongst animals by the involvement of a sword is humorous precisely because the response and possible outcome (the death of the young man or some assorted wildlife) is so disproportionate to the offense given that it creates an intense feeling of incongruity which is resolvable through the recognition of the factor's foolishness in reacting in this manner (LM).

This is not nonsense humor; the factor's response to accusations of being a runaway servant and being assaulted by farm animals is rightfully one of self-defense, but the response remains an exaggerated one. The target of the joke (TA) in this case is the factor, and this way in which he is continually characterized as a fool in the poem, while seemingly hard to deny, is central to Ford's discussion of the poem's role in shaping American nationalism (which we will address in a moment). Moreover, the constant abuse he endures can also be read as support of my own claims regarding Eben and his counterpart in the factor, as the mocking of the character can be extrapolated to mockery of the things he stands for. The situation of the joke (SI) is as previously described: The weary sot-weed factor retires to bed after a reasonably pleasant meal at his host's table, only to have his sleeping space invaded by farm animals, a situation which is inherently rustic and typifies, again, the backwoods locale into which he has stumbled from his former home in Great Britain. The language (LA) and narrative strategies (NS) employed here are what really sell this joke, however.

First, we have the usual high language of the poem deployed in ways that attribute an unnatural gravity to the situation and imbue the quarreling animals with humanlike qualities while eventually casting the factor in a more animalistic light. During the fight between the pig and cat, the dog is "prudent" and barks "to keep the Peace" in order to resolve the "feud" between the other two animals, which is also described as a "quarrel." Thus, the encounter between the animals is given certain human traits (as a "feud" or "quarrel"), while the dog is supposedly a prudent peacekeeper who, ironically, tries to restore "peace" (read: peace and quiet of the night) through excessive noise. The fox and poultry then "break into" the factor's room, and the domicile becomes a "Place of Combat" and a "Field" which the factor has won after expelling the marauding creatures. In essence, the poetic excess of the language

matches the factor's excessive physical response. Conversely, after the brawl, he is likened to a "roasting Capon" and a "Flitch of Bacon," and the animal terms employed here could be read as a further indictment of the man who certainly cuts quite the ridiculous figure. While his near use of the sword in the face of the youth's insult might be justified as an insult to his honor (albeit delivered by one far below his seeming social station), the war he wages against the animals of the farm certainly marks him as a zealous fool, and the language used to describe him marks his descent from a gentlemanly station to that of the animals he feuds with. Of course, the factor's encounters with animals are not done either. He retires to the orchard, only to find that the croaking of frogs, like "Such Peals the Dead to Life wou'd bring. . . .", prevents him from sleeping still (10). In response to the noise, he stuffs cotton into his ears, only to hear the sound of a rattlesnake (despite the cotton), which drives him up a tree, "the Devil and Snake defy'd," which is a slightly humorous association given the biblical affinity of devil, snake, and tree. He spends the rest of the night in the tree assaulted by "curst Muskitoes" (10). He cannot escape abuse, no matter what he does.

As I previously stated, there are clear analogues to these scenes in Barth's novel, which makes a comparison of the two worthwhile, especially because the mistreatment of Eben and the factor can also be read as an indictment of the false ideals they represent. One of the first words to describe Eben in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is the term "flitch," after all, as Barth creates a clear allusion to the aforementioned conflict with the animals in the poem. Barth likewise treats the temper of the factor character (Eben in the novel) humorously and more frequently than does the poem. For instance, there is the scene after Eben has received the promise of a commission from Baltimore/Burlingame and goes looking for a notebook in which to collect "every gem he mines from the mother lode of fancy" (107). The Laureate-to-

be finds his way “to the establishment of one Benjamin Bragg, at the Sign of the Raven in Paternoster Row—a printer, bookseller, and stationer whom he and many of his companions patronized” (107). The inclusion of Bragg in the story as the person from whom Eben acquires his notebook is another subtle nod of Barth’s toward the original poem, which was printed and sold by “*D. Bragg, at the Raven in Pater-Noster-Row*” in 1708 (Cooke iii).⁴ In addition to creating an allusion to the novel’s source material, the inclusion of Bragg also serves Barth’s purpose of toying with historical figures, and he applies to the bookseller a thin coating of grime as he previously had done to Newton and More. Bragg becomes “a waspish, bright-eyed, honey-voiced little man in his forties of whom it was rumored that he was a Sodomite . . .” (107). Once introduced, the over-eager fictional Bragg then provides Eben with an *extensive* list of possible notebooks, offering a dizzying array of options and querying the poet about his preferences without end until Eben erupts and slams the counter with his fist, crying, “Damn you, fellow, thou’rt pulling my leg for fair!” (109). The scene continues, however, with Bragg enumerating the various “species of common notebook” in the form of a repetitively-worded list like so:

A thin plain cardboard folio,
 A thin plain cardboard quarto,
 A thin plain leather folio,
 A thin ruled cardboard folio
 A fat plain cardboard folio,
 A thin plain leather quarto,
 A thin ruled cardboard quarto. . . . (110)

And so on and so forth, until Eben once again calls for him to stop, at which point Bragg suggests further possibilities and the poet's sword makes its first appearance as he cries, "Have at thee, Sodomite! . . . 'Tis thy life or mine, for another of thy evil options and I am lost!" (110-111). Eben's anger is abated through the intervention of "Colonel Peter Sayer" (Burlingame in disguise) but flares again when Bragg, thoroughly exasperated with the indecisive poet, decides to "*compromise*" and modify (read: destroy) the notebook for him, prompting Eben to employ the sword once again: "'*Compromise!*' Ebenezer shouted, and brought down his sword upon the mutilated notebook with such a mighty chop that, had Bragg not just then stepped back to contemplate his creation he'd surely have contemplated his Creator. The covers parted; the binding let go; pages flew in all directions" (113). Bragg runs screaming into the street and Eben snatches the first notebook he can find and hurries away through the rear of the store, startling two apprentices at their work; and, of course, this same notebook is later revealed to be Bragg's ledger, which Eben eventually uses to clean himself after fouling his pants (113).

In terms of its purely comedic value, the scene described above functions very similarly to the ones outlined in the poem—Eben responds to a situation with force that does not warrant it. The meeting with the male youth of the poem does not occur in the novel since Eben and Bertrand meet with the swine-herd "Susan Warren" (Joan Toast) instead, but the nighttime scene with the animals occurs nearly as described, with only the slight difference that Eben encounters the creatures outside as he makes his way to the barn to have sex with "Susan." The poet relieves himself on a cat, which "set an entire universe in motion" and claws the nearest creature to it—a pig, which bleats and disturbs the other animals in the barn, including dogs; Eben fights off the "combatants" with a stick but sends

the cat running into the midst of the poultry, who peck the poet's head and legs in their attempts to flee, which further engages the dogs who then run Eben up a tree and keep him there for fifteen minutes: at which point he attempts to descend, only to hear a rattlesnake (or possibly just crickets) which so frightens him that he remains in the tree and is mauled by mosquitoes (322-323). The action is much the same as in the poem, and if Eben comes off as a little less excessive for want of his sword, the extra details Barth adds to the scene—the poultry pecking at Eben, the fact that he descends his tree in search of Susan only to encounter a naked Burlingame (whose manhood he inadvertently discovers only by “clutching amorously at her form” in the darkened barn) who is having sex with a pig—make it, if anything, more ridiculous than its source material. It certainly presents a more tawdry version of the story without sacrificing the figure of the bumbling newcomer to the colonies. As I have been suggesting throughout, the incompetent figure who is continually lambasted, of Eben (in the novel) and the unnamed factor (in the poem), has a similar function in both cases. In the novel, Eben's ridiculousness serves to render him and the beliefs associated with him ridiculous, thus offering, as I have argued previously, a critique of the sort of naïveté that believing in and endorsing a sanitized history (for the purposes of personal edification or fostering feelings of nationalism) engenders. The factor of the poem is similarly ill-equipped to survive in the world outside England, and the exchange with the planter's son concerning the origins of Native Americans reveals in him the same mythic leanings (ridiculous to the modern reader) as Eben, as well as some of that same naïveté.

Sarah Ford presents an alternative possibility for the function of the humorous misadventures of the factor in her essay “Humor's Role in Imagining America: Ebenezer Cook's ‘The Sot-Weed Factor.’” Early in her essay, Ford notes that “[h]umorous writings . . .

have received little attention related to their role in the process of nationalism” (1). Of course, using the term “nationalism” here, within the context of this project, might raise some questions. After all, Ford uses the term positively in her essay. Humor, argues Ford in her reading of Cooke’s poem, helps the colonists to bond together to create an American community. The connotation of the term “nationalism” is different in her essay from its popular, often negative use, which is the way I have employed it here. I do not disagree with Ford’s reading of the poem. Her initial assertion that “[b]oth audiences for the poem, English citizens and colonists, would then find it humorous, . . . with the English citizens laughing at the portrayal of colonists as uncivilized and the colonists laughing at the British factor’s ineptitude” reflects the critical consensus regarding the deployment of Cooke’s satire (1). It is difficult to determine who is the target of the poem’s humor: the British factor or the colonists. Ford’s reading of the situation turns upon the way that the factor’s general surliness and bad attitude toward the colonists causes him to distance himself, “thus taking on the role of the outsider” (1)—specifically a British outsider, about whom the colonist characters are permitted to feel either tolerance, confusion, or, perhaps more appropriately, a certain critical distance when the factor fails to comprehend the posture appropriate to riding in a canoe or draws his sword on poultry. Ford writes, as the factor continually proves himself to be a buffoon and outsider, “the colonists become insiders who perceive the humor in [his] inability to adapt to life in America. The humor of the poem forms an imagined American community by uniting colonists who get the New World jokes” (2). To refer back to the humor of incongruity in particular and humor studies in general: Appreciating a joke involves resolving its incongruities through a logical process of some kind; therefore, certain jokes can only be resolved (and the humor appreciated) by a particular audience, and shared

jokes are one of the pieces of a unifying culture, something that the members *get* and which marks them as joined together in some way. Ford notes, of course, that when Cooke was writing his poem at the very beginning of the eighteenth century, America was still a British colony—and many colonists would have still seen themselves as British, as I noted in the introduction—“but before the colonists *could* revolt and form a political nation, they had to first be seen as a separate entity” (3). Shared jokes or a common cultural sense of humor would conceivably aid this process of differentiation.

This “nationalist” sentiment is positive in Ford’s essay because it focuses on exposing fundamental differences and rough edges rather than preserving hegemony or whitewashing history or fact. Instead, “[i]t allows both its English and colonial audiences to see the separation of the Old World from the New and allows the colonists laughing together to see themselves as Americans” (11). Of course, Barth’s novel sends a radically different message about identities, as he continually subverts the notion of a stable identity throughout the novel by having Burlingame continually switch his, while confronting Eben with the fluidity of his own by placing him in situations where other characters like Burlingame and Bertrand take it on themselves. Even if Burlingame does assert that “one must postulate one’s importance, even if such a postulate flies in the face of the facts,” writes W. L. Godshalk, the fact remains that Barth’s novel “mock[s] man’s assertions of his importance in the universe,” as well as “his myths and his history—those elements of our culture which are always handled so humorlessly by the professional theologians and historians” (279). Having a stable personal identity in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is hard enough, and if we extrapolate from this sendup of the personal—Eben even begins to doubt his own, thanks to Burlingame’s mind games—to the level of the national, then designations like “American” and “British”

for Barth become just as ambiguous. Eben, after all, was born in America but identifies with the British mindset of the factor in the poem. The fact that he was born in the colonies does not give him an inherently American quality (or at least something different from the British). As with history, Barth uses Eben as a vehicle through which to examine larger issues. There is no metaphysical America or metaphysical Eben. Identity, as Bertrand notes during the voyage across the Atlantic when he is playing the gentleman-poet and Eben the servant, is a simple matter of performativity, and a valet is as qualified to imitate the manners (and being) of his gentleman as anyone else with the observational skills to note their behaviors and then duplicate them would be (Barth 218). This is quite a different message from that of the poem as read by Ford and others.

Cy Charles League takes an approach similar to that of Ford in interpreting the humor and message of the Sot-Weed poem in “The Process of Americanization as Portrayed in Ebenezer Cooke’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*.” While the task of determining whether the British or the colonists are the primary “recipients of the majority of Cooke’s venom” is important, League suggests that it may be “more useful to notice that Cooke’s double-bladed satire implies an intersection point . . . between the American and British ideologies of the day, a recognition of the increasing differences between the two cultures . . . [and] actuates a prescient commentary on the cultural journey from Old to New World manners” (19). Additionally, while there is some indictment of the British and the colonists, “[i]t is made clear almost from the very beginning that the sot-weed factor is a buffoon” (19)—a sentiment Scott Peeples echoes in “Teaching ‘The Sot-Weed Factor’ Out of Historical Context,” in which he writes that it is clear the narrator takes himself too seriously, and “we are invited from the beginning to laugh both with and at [him]” (353). This situation involving the factor

of the poem parallels the one presented by Barth in his novel: Eben (and the factor) are characters towards whom the reader will alternatively feel empathy/sympathy and derision. Because these are literary figures, however, their presentation as individuals signifies more than its surface value. When we identify with or distance ourselves (by laughter) from these characters, we simultaneously become complicit with or critical of their beliefs and ideologies. One of Peebles's students, for example, recognized something far more meaningful than just "the assault on the factor's senses and sensibilities" in a poem that, on the surface, concerns little more than the story of an opportunistic, high-minded Briton who becomes an "easy [mark] for provincial opportunists and swindlers," curses the colonial people, and leaves (353-4). Most importantly, Peebles's "[student] recognized in 'The Sot-Weed Factor' a counternarrative to those texts that celebrate American self-making and individualism . . ." (355). The factor of the poem is an immigrant to the colonies, seeking to make his fortune despite the rough circumstances of his past in a way that would eventually characterize American nationalist narratives praising the merits of the nation and its fruitful opportunities for all comers. However, instead of a land of idealistic opportunity, the fledgling America of the poem is an impoverished wilderness filled with unscrupulous characters. This eighteenth-century treatment of the land that would become America's contrasts seems to foreshadow the nationalist principles it would later espouse but then continually undermine by styling itself as a "melting pot" or land of opportunity only to fear and repulse the very people it styled itself as welcoming (the Irish, the Chinese, the Mexicans, etc). As always, at the heart of America (and American satire and humor) is the secret knowledge of the incongruities that have always existed here. The contrast between

what is said and what is fact naturally creates doubt about the veracity of claims made either in the past, the present, or in the latter and concerning the former.

Of course, there is an argument to be made that the preponderance of vice in Cooke's poem need not be taken for historical fact either, as "the fact that there existed honest residents of [the actual] Maryland is irrelevant, or nearly so. The world of satire is always populated by fools and knaves; the only good qualities to be discovered reside in the narrator or, less ambiguously and less frequently, within selected characters in the work . . ." (Arner 34). This exaggeration, as I noted in the introduction to this project and the previous paragraph, is typical of satire and central to the American sense of humor. Like the early humorous writing of the satirist Ward, Cooke's poem suggests certain "[m]oral and ethical norms [that] are established either by implication—acceptable behavior is the opposite of what the speaker attacks—or by passages in which the writer temporarily abandons his ironic voice and bestows sincere praise upon an individual or an action" (34). That being said, the indictments of the poem are revealed not just through the condemnation or approbation of the factor but through dramatic irony as well—again, the comedic or satiric qualities of his behavior and his judgments are not apparent to him. The reader can appreciate the fact that "[t]he New World, in other words, presents experiences which expose some of the frauds of the Old, as well as the other way around . . ." (36). As Ford and other scholars have argued, after all, the satire of the piece cuts both ways, indicting at times both the British and the colonists. This is not to say that the poem lacks historical verisimilitude for the sake of humor, however. As Chris Beyers notes in "Ebenezer Cooke's Satire," the landscape and culture of the colonies as depicted in the poem "can be verified by relatively more reliable sources":

Certain details are obviously true—the perilous voyage across the Atlantic, the fact that mosquitoes and frogs fill the swamps around the Chesapeake Bay. . . . Descriptions of clothing, food, horses, buildings, heavy drinking, concern about runaway servants, debates on the race of Native Americans, and women working in the fields, can be confirmed in contemporary accounts and by the archaeological and other evidence brought forth by historians. Further, the poem clearly depicts two attributes that Maryland’s colonists prided themselves upon: generous hospitality and shrewd bargaining. (63)

These accurate elements of the poem make it at once “a valuable ‘social document’” while simultaneously undermining the veracity of its historical account because “Cooke [gives] the reader every reason to doubt his narrator” and his observations (63). Certainly, in light of my discussion, the fact that the factor cuts such a ridiculous figures does undermine all his observations and judgments, including his more general descriptions of the colonies as a historical place. Furthermore, even the fact that the factor and Eben are ridiculous characters is not necessarily the focus of the poem and novel. According to Beyers, “[g]iven Cooke’s approach to satire, the greater point of the poem is not that the narrator is an ass—though he is—or that the social conditions of Maryland should have been improved, though they probably should have been. The factor’s real error was that he did not realize that, as he pursues his own self-interest, the people he was dealing with pursue theirs” (76).

This conclusion that Beyers draws is similar to Ford’s in that it posits that the factor fails to recognize the agency of the colonists as opportunists like himself and possibly as a branching group growing further away from the British root from which they sprang and that should no longer be judged based on the expectations and norms established across the

Atlantic; however, he also goes a step further and suggests that the poem is “built on the premise of an inescapable, ineluctable prevalence of vice” and a “fallen world” in which neither virtue nor vice are critiqued; the latter, rising from “the innate depravity of humanity,” should be tolerated, according to Beyers, “so long as human imperfection promotes the socially desirable goal of prosperity” (77). In essence, while Cooke’s poem does not necessarily criticize virtue like Barth’s novel does, it does suggest to critics like Beyers a similar message about the ways in which vice is often concealed, whether it is through the promotional literature of the seventeenth century which cast the colonies as a new Eden, or as a result of the sort of whitewashed historical narratives that still exist today. Both Beyers and Arner identify the concealment or denial of the truth of things as one of the targets of Cooke’s satire. Likewise, I would argue (and have argued) that this critique can be extended to whitewashed historical accounts that serve nationalist agendas today. Beyers concludes that the poem makes an argument for an acceptance of if not an engagement with the vice which, being all but ubiquitous, is the true condition of mankind. The factor of the poem never realizes this, however. While Eben eventually rejects his notions of a virtuous reality (and self) in favor of exposure to what he used to see as the evils of the world, the factor of the poem never reaches this conclusion, choosing instead to leave the colonies to return to what he feels is the more civilized world of Britain.

In Barth’s novel, the composition of the poem itself is integrated into the story, and Eben writes it roughly two-thirds of the way through his roughly eight hundred page adventure. Thus the poem, within the context of the novel, becomes an incomplete account of the events of the factor’s (or Eben’s) life, written after a brief flirtation with suicide and an illness that accompanies his marriage to Susan Warren (aka Joan Toast). He contemplates the

stolen ledger that has become his laureate's notebook and finds himself identifying more with the "stained and battered" volume than with the verses he had initially (and prematurely) composed during the early days of his journey to the colonies (457). He exclaims, "Here's naught but scoundrels and perverts, hovels and brothels, corruption and poltroonery! What glory, to be singer of such a sewer!" (457). He then composes the poem in a rush, and Barth takes the time to have Eben pair the events of the novel with those of the poem, though, of course, some events and characters, such as the missing awkward crossing in the "canoo" and Susan Warren, do not quite fit the plot of the poem. He concludes the composition with the factor's curse upon the colonies and affixes his name with "grand contempt" (462). The story of the poem's composition occurs prior to the aforementioned revelations about the nature of virtue and vice, though.

Because the protagonist of the real Cooke's poem never reaches the conclusions that Eben does about the virtue of vice does not mean that the poem fails to communicate a similarly strong message critiquing the same sort of high-minded behavior, as the examination above hopefully evinces. There may even be, as Arner notes, something self-reflexive about the humorous treatment of Cooke's factor in the poem, despite "the apparent biographical contradiction between the sentiments expressed in the poem and Cooke's decision to take up permanent residence in the province" (47): namely that "Cooke employs one of the conventions of satire, the satire of the satirist" (40)—if not of himself (the real world poet and satirist), then of the factor, the ostensible narrator, author, and satirist responsible for the poem according to its own internal narrative. This self-deprecation, if we take it as such, forges yet another link between Barth's novel and Cooke's poem; Eben, the scholar insulated to the point of becoming asocial, and the poetic artist with more confidence

than talent, reflects some of the qualities critics sometimes find in Barth, while the factor of the poem might have once been the incompetent outsider in the colonies before settling there. There are some problems with this reading of the character, though, which League notes in his essay. If Cooke wrote the poem not long before publishing it initially in 1708, by which point he would have been familiar with the colony of Maryland, then it does not make sense to read the poem as a thinly-veiled story of his own acceptance of the mores of the New World; after all, he later changed the ending of the piece with its reprinting in 1731, which could not actually reflect the writer's "softened stance toward colonial Maryland" unless the original had either been written much earlier than critics such as Edward H. Cohen suggest or, more likely, is a work of fiction starring a protagonist that bears only a small resemblance to Cooke (or is a creation for humorous purposes like Eben), if they are similar at all (League 19). History simply does not provide enough information to make such a judgment.

Coda

Something in the Air

“La, methinks expediency, and not truth, is this tale’s warp, and subterfuge its woof. . . . In short, ’tis creatured from the whole cloth, that even I can see doth not hang all in a piece. ’Tis a fabric of contradictories.”

– Eben Cooke, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960)

In the opening paragraph of his apologia in the brief fourth part of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth decries the merits and sanctity of virtue and of history, as an abstract, mythic concept and as a discipline:

LEST IT BE OBJECTED by a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians that he has in this lengthy history played more fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler’s muse, than ever Captain John Smith dared, the Author here posits in advance, by way of surety, three blue-chip replies arranged in order of decreasing relevancy. In the first place be it remembered, as Burlingame himself observed, that we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest; the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must sculpt. . . . Moreover, this Clio was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her. . . . [T]he Author joins with pleasure the most engaging company imaginable, . . . the noblest in poetry, prose, and politics. . . .” (743)

Barth's "apology" to the reader only serves to implicate all and sundry as being in collusion with him (as well as all other poets, authors, and politicians) in the process of altering history. John Smith, secret eggplant ritual or no, was still a notorious contributor to the whitewashing of the past thanks to his role in crafting the promotional literature of the seventeenth century that painted the early colonial landscape as Edenic and heroic. Smith and the elder Burlingame's conflicting accounts of the Pocahontas story in the novel "are also akin to the various forms [of the legend] that have actually been passed down to us"—Smith actually wrote about his escape from this same group of Indians four different times, and while Pocahontas appears briefly in the third version, she only fulfills her famous role as the savior of Smith in the fourth; therefore, if the account as it is popularly known were true, why would Smith not share it all the first time around? (Morrell, "Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus" 43). Barth's snark in the apology aside, Morrell offers a reading of the reasoning behind the account other than the one suggested above, which amounts to "Everyone else does it, and now so have I..." Conversely, Morrell argues, as I have, that Barth's novel's treatment of history and myth serve to call into question all such accounts, as his "invention of history is but another illustration of . . . doubt and confusion: nothing is what it seems, both present and past—things could have happened any number of ways, if indeed they happened at all" (41); furthermore, he wants "to demonstrate how little we can be certain of what actually happened in history" (40).

Likewise, in "The Joke as Informing Principle in 'The Sot-Weed Factor,'" Richard A. Betts writes that "[t]he common etymology of the terms *history* and *story* is understood and imaginatively exploited by Barth," who, Betts argues, sees history in the same terms used to describe Eben's appreciation for the actual history of the Greeks and Romans he idolizes as

“the stuff of metaphors;” additionally, “these metaphors are invariably comic” (41). Betts refers specifically to one of the most prominent examples of this in the novel—the story of Sir Henry Burlingame, John Smith, and Pocahontas, where the story that has been told and retold to the point of entering the popular consciousness (John Smith rescued from death by the daughter of an Indian chief) is completely turned on its head to great comedic effect. Each of these stories-within-stories in the novel, including but not limited to the various installments of Smith’s aptly-named “Secret Historie,” Betts notes, “stands by itself as a well-spun tale and dirty joke” (42). Many of these jokes depend upon Barth’s wordplay—hence the sometimes extensive analyses detailed in the previous chapters, breaking down the humor of the novel—and Betts describes this quality in Barth as a “verbal dexterity . . . evidence by the exhaustiveness, extravagance, and sheer quantity of the witticisms, quips, and puns and by the variety of other outrageous word games” (45). The humor results from the level of language as well as content, however, and often turns upon the contrast between the two.

As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. writes in his introduction to *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, the humor in American satire arises from the fact that “the ordinary man, as he is, unregenerate and uncaring . . . is satirized by being described in a language mode customarily reserved for more elevated subject matter” (13). Barth’s *Sot-Weed Factor*, of course, is written in an eighteenth-century style, using the phrasing and language of the time, and there is a direct contrast between the subject matter and what modern readers would perceive to be an elevated tone—the apparent sophistication of the language is “undercut by the broad vulgar comedy” of the action (15). This is the same humor of incongruity and/or oppositional scripts which I identified in the introduction as one of the

foci of this project's examination of Barth and Cooke's work. This humorous quality is by no means exclusive to modernity and postmodernity, though. As I noted earlier, it is a style of humor with an extensive history, and it is an essential quality of American humor. According to Rubin, "Out of the incongruity between mundane circumstance and heroic ideal, material fact and spiritual hunger, democratic, middle-class society and desire for cultural definition, theory of equality and fact of social and economic inequality. . . .—between what men would be and must be, as acted out in American experience has come much pathos . . . and also a great deal of humor" (9). This is the titular "Great American Joke" of Rubin's essay and also represents a trend in American writing and thinking which I would argue can be traced all the way back to Cooke: It is an engagement with contrasts and incongruities, with the ideal and the real, historical and otherwise. Likewise, it is an essential part of satire—the awareness of the distance between the ideal and the real and the desire to correct the disparity, or at least call attention to it, through humor.

Now, lest the above criticism of history be misinterpreted, I would like to take a moment to point out that the practice of keeping historical records (of keeping a factual history) is not under attack here. After all, a history serves the very real purpose of cataloguing what has come before, and it is in the manipulations of said record that the problems begin to appear. Barth seems to suggest that the "happenings" of some general, objective past *did* happen but are corrupted by their present uses by individuals and governments with agendas, like Smith himself. I would, in fact, go as far as to cautiously evoke the old axiom about those who do not learn something from history. The sentiment, if not the actual meaning, of that phrase means something. History exists for a reason—to inform and sometimes justify the attitudes of the present. There is something to *learn* from it,

for better or for worse. There is value there, but it pays to be careful, as history is written by the winners, we say, with victories to cement in the record books.

Alternatively, history can be written by the idealistic, by men blinded by ideals like young Eben Cooke of Barth's novel; however, placing too much weight on ideals is not conducive to a healthy, critically-aware personal or political life. In the case of young Cooke, the interactions in his own head of his obsessions with virtue, poetics, and mythic history cause him to constantly stagger under the realization that life cannot live up to his expectations. He survives his brush with the vice of the world (and the disease of his bride) only to find his resolution to forgo the ideal of virtue and worry no more about his station challenged after Burlingame's departure and Anna's pregnancy starts the rumor of incest between the siblings and the poet's twin begins to contemplate suicide as a remedy to her stance as a "fallen woman." She is "wholly disgraced," but so is Eben; they must both bear up under the "shame" that they have incurred ever since relocating to the colonies (748).

Similarly, the factor of the poem laments his own vaguely alluded to fall from grace in Britain, and his sojourn in the colonies critiques at once both the ineffectiveness of the British nationalist mindset of ruling from afar and the merchant's unwillingness to accept his fallen state—as a representative of the empire, he is completely ill-prepared for the culture that he finds in the colonies and thus condemns it out of hand, as, like Eben, he is unable to appreciate the fact that his own homeland and experiences are far from virtuous. For example, though he arrives in the colonies remembering fondly the mythic Albion he has been forced to flee, the factor offers a different portrait of his homeland and of one of its prestigious institutions—"Mother *Cambridge*"—when he debates the origins of Native Americans with the son of the planter who acts as his guide. As I mentioned previously, the

factor does not think much of the youth's assumption that the Indians of North America might be the descendants of people from Asia who crossed over to the continent. The factor smiles "to hear my young Logician / Thus reason like a Politician; / Who ne're by Father's Pains and Earning / Had got at Mother *Cambridge* Learning . . ." (Cooke 12-13). And what is the Cambridge experience according to the factor? It involves "stoutly" drinking and obtaining "carnal knowledge" (13)—and, of course, this description of higher education probably sounds familiar to us today. Arguing that a twentieth-century novel and eighteenth-century poem share a common message or similar themes is, of course, a problematic undertaking. Charles B. Harris suggests that there are similarities between the real world context of the novel and poem in *Passionate Virtuosity*, arguing that "[i]n doing research for that novel he [Barth] must have been struck by the congenial spirit linking that age to his own," largely due to what Harris describes as the "paradigmatic shift" occurring in the late '50s:

Early in this century the Newtonian model of the universe began to yield to new metaphoric formulations of the universe. . . . Our celebrated sense of *Angst*, a seemingly endless succession of wars and crises, religious and political upheavals, an intense intellectual fermentation in which truths previously held self-evident are radically called into question. . . . Ebenezer Cooke's seventeenth century was an age of similar confusion and desperation Such eschatological sentiments should ring familiar to readers of modern and postmodern literature, with its similar themes of entropy and spiritual anomie. . . . [T]he apocalyptic imagination forms as integral a part of the Baroque period in literature . . . as of the postmodern. (54-55)

Harris goes on to draw further comparisons between the writing of Cooke's time and postmodern thought, including "a self-reflexive and unrealistic quality," "a love of paradox and contradiction; a love of a conception of the world as essentially fictive:" a so-called "blackly humorous combination of levity and seriousness" (55). These qualities are evident in the university when we discuss postmodernism in particular, but the general feeling of angst described by Harris (the result of that "endless succession" of conflicts and tragedies) also suggests apocalyptic thinking in the scholarly and popular consciousness, a deep-seated feeling of doubt about the state of things that, once again, was by no means unknown in Cooke's time.

And maybe there *is* something humorously apocalyptic to our current thinking about America in the air. Just the other day I had a passing exchange with a student who, on his way out of the office, happened to overhear an off-hand remark I made about not really liking IHOP food all that much (by which I meant breakfast food in general). He jokingly suggested that not liking IHOP was un-American, to which I replied, with a grin, "It's the *International* House of Pancakes, not the American house of pancakes, and I have never been outside this country. I'm hardly un-American." This exchange is positively loaded with assumptions about American culture and nationalism being purposefully deployed for laughs, including the stereotypes of America as a carb-heavy nation with no appreciation for anything that exists outside our borders—the implication of the latter notion being that when we do venture outside the country we do so badly and to much humorous effect. Tonight (the 4th of March in 2015), the comedian Conan O'Brien will air a special episode of his talk show *Conan* that was filmed in Cuba—perhaps the first of many now that the political situation between America and Cuba is becoming slightly more *simpatico*—and features the

well-known lanky redhead performing his shtick for a curious non-American audience, thus adding another layer to the venerable comedy tradition of the American abroad that includes such pop culture notables as *National Lampoon's European Vacation* (1985), *Beerfest* (2006), and more than a handful of *Simpsons* episodes where “American’s favorite family” invades countries like Australia and Japan. In each of these cases, including the upcoming “Conan in Cuba,” there is a sense of self-mockery—if not a liberal Hollywood defaming a politically conservative national consciousness, then a growing popular awareness of the decadence of the myth of America as the land of the free, home of the brave and virtuous, and the defender of the free world at large which can be found in t-shirts blazoned with the saying “America: Back-to-Back World War Champs” and in the satirical film *Team America World Police*’s (2004) theme song, “America, Fuck Yeah!”

One recent example of this trend in apocalyptic thinking about American nationalism is the phrase “merica,” an abbreviation of “America” that is often used to signify a reaction to anything seen as inherently—usually stereotypically—American. One finds in “merica” (often pronounced “murica” and spoken in a gruff tone with a slight growl of a southern accent) an acknowledgement of the sort of unquestioning, rootin’-tootin’ nationalism now commonly associated with certain political groups with certain ideals—usually the politically right and the sorts of reductive stereotypes associated with it: the pickup truck driving, 2nd Amendment toting variety. Even though there is something self-aware about the phrase and its meaning, there is also a certain satisfaction to it, namely a delight in the joke if not in the sentiment implied by the term. Here, as well as in media like *The Colbert Report*, one finds a certain kind of ironic nationalism on par with the ironic sexism and racism of other popular and commercial products. These are all ideas that are invoked with a wink and a nudge. The

sexism, racism, and nationalism are so hyperbolic and ridiculous that they are meant to invoke laughter, the joke being that these are all things we recognize and no longer have to take seriously.

The problem with this mentality, of course, is that any invocation, even ironic, is still an *invocation*, and on a subconscious level, the fear of cultural critics, especially in the cases of ironic sexism and racism, is that the laughter and the feelings of positivity that it engenders will normalize these otherwise reprehensible expressions, thus rendering the critique, be it satirical, parodic, or otherwise, ineffectual—ironic portrayals run the risk of only reaffirming the very notions that they mock (Sarkeesian). This is the central problem with postmodern parody, as observed by critics such as Linda Hutcheon. According to Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, postmodernism can only question from within familiar structures—“inscribe and yet critique” (44). The reproduction of the target of the indictment for the purposes of parody so closely resembles the original problematic source material that it can be difficult to distinguish between the source of the trouble and the criticism being leveled at it. Just because we have begun to mock something does not mean that it is no longer an issue. Sexism and racism remain salient issues in our country, and so do nationalism and the accompanying ideals and justifying history.

Both the *Sot-Weed* novel and poem have different aims—the former parodies the picaresque and satirizes mythic ideals and history; the latter can even be read as a critique of British nationalism and colonial enterprises—but they also both reproduce the structures that they indict. Barth’s novel is still picaresque, though admittedly hyperbolic in the extreme; Cooke’s poem captures an incredibly unflattering portrait of the colonists for the British public to peruse, and while it might disabuse the British of any lingering illusions created by

the promotional literature of the seventeenth century, it would also support claims that the colonists were uncouth and needed British rule to civilize them. They certainly would not have read it as Safer does—as a testament to the solidarity of the colonists apart from the British crown—and, in fact, according to Morrell, British readers “were so amused that instead they felt the poem was ironic, a demonstration of the wit and culture in that province” (“Ebenezer Cooke, Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus” 40); therefore, as much as one can read a critique in the book or poem, one can also observe the converse at work: Barth’s novel is a celebration of the burlesque and picaresque, and he tries to preserve his subversion of the form in the fourth and final section of the novel which skips past the happy reunions typical of the genre to describe the slow decline of all his characters into historical anonymity and death. According to Morrell, “The demands of the form require . . . a neat tying together of the story, but the demands of history require a detailing of what happened to everyone following the trial” (“Ebenezer Cooke, Virgin, Poet, and Laureate of Maryland” 57). Nonetheless, Eben’s intended epitaph is ignored by his descendants, who choose instead to engrave his headstone “with the usual piffle” instead of his final poetic composition that reflects his realization of the futility of his earlier views (Barth 756). The poet who has by this point given over his high-minded notions casts himself in the lowliest of lights—“Here moulds a posing, foppish Actor, / Author of THE SOT-WEED FACTOR, / Falsely prais’d. Take Heed, who sees this / Epitaph; look ye to Jesus!” (755)—is given a whitewashing in death like the very one he had proposed for the province of dear, “shitten” Maryland: one which will change the way he is to be viewed by history.

Notes

1. One should not expect a truly comprehensive discussion of the history of humor here. The purpose of this section is to provide a broad overview of or introduction to the foundational concepts of humor studies so that the subsequent reading of Barth can be contextualized. For further background on the subject, I wholly recommend Victor Raskin's collection of essays, all of which offer more on the history of humor than I will cover here; furthermore, the appearance of the Greeks and Romans here, at the start of the project, foreshadows their frequent reappearance throughout, particularly in the discussion of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and young Eben Cooke's mythic conception of virtue and history.
2. In his introduction to *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1987, Anchor Books Edition), John Barth points to two notable works written since he began his own research in 1956. These two books—J.A. Leo LeMay's *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland* (1972) and Edward H. Cohen's *Ebenezer Cooke; The Sot-Weed Canon* (1974)—remain the most cited authorities on the subject of Cooke.
3. These numbers come from the original 1960 publication of the novel by Doubleday, which features about sixty "extra" pages of material that have been subsequently removed from other editions, including the 1987 Anchor Books publication used for the majority of this project. In his foreword to the Anchor Books publication (an addition that makes this version superior for research purposes), Barth describes the removed material thusly: "No

plot protein was removed, only some excess verbal calories” (v). The version of the 1960 *Sot-Weed Factor* novel referred to here is electronic and, therefore, searchable.

4. Morrell notes that “D. Bragg” was actually a misspelling committed by Brantz Mayer when he re-issued the poem in 1865, basing his printing off the original piece and not the slightly altered version in which Cooke himself softened his criticism somewhat. Morrell further suggests that this slip-up invites even greater historical doubt regarding Cooke and his work, and this same idea, of course, works well with my ongoing arguments here (“Ebenezer Cooke, *Sot-Weed Factor Redivivus*” 41).

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